Soldiers of Misfortune

Percival Christopher Wren

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SOLDIERS OF MISFORTUNE

The Story of Otho Bellême

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

BEAU GESTE
BEAU SABREUR
BEAU IDEAL
GOOD GESTES
THE WAGES OF VIRTUE
STEPSONS OF FRANCE
THE SNAKE AND THE SWORD
FATHER GREGORY
DEW AND MILDEW
DRIFTWOOD SPARS
THE YOUNG STAGERS

SOLDIERS *of* MISFORTUNE

THE STORY OF OTHO BELLÊME

who

"loved chivalry, truth and honour, freedom and courtesy" but was head-strong, stubborn, romantical, and most unwise.

By

PERCIVAL CHRISTOPHER WREN

"All things shall pass away; everything shall vanish—the highest rank, power, all-embracing genius; everything shall crumble to dust; but brave deeds shall not vanish as smoke."

TURGENEV.

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TO

MY WIFE

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It is written (and shall come to pass).

CONTENTS

PAGE

PROLOGUE 3

BOOK I

THE YOUTH OF OTHO BELLÊME 11

BOOK II

BELLÊME OF THE LEGION 323

EPILOGUE 361

PROLOGUE

Soldiers of Misfortune

PROLOGUE

THE lady El Isa Beth el Ain paced the grim stone cell that was her boudoir, like a caged tigress. From time to time she stood still as a statue, staring with unseeing eyes across the plain, three hundred feet below the little stone balcony that clung like a swallow's nest to the wall of this great castle built upon the edge of a mighty cliff.

"This is true talk?" she asked once again, turning to the slave-woman who crouched at the foot of the native bed on which a child lay asleep. This divan was, with the exception of some greasy cushions and soiled frayed rugs, the only furniture of the room.

"True as the Words of the Book?" she continued.

"For if you have lied to me, you shall hang by one toe until you drop from the cord. . . . If it is true and you have saved the child's life, you shall have a girdle of gold coins. . . . But it *would* be true! . . . May the she-devil burn, and her grave be defiled. . . . May the Kaid turn against her, and bury her alive in a sack."

"It is true, Lady. May I be struck as dumb as Hassan my brother if I lie to you. . . . The Kaid, the merciful, the compassionate, on whom be the peace of Allah, agreed. . . . At first he said *'No'* . . . and then the Lady Zainub swore you were plotting to kill the princeling Raisul, that your child might take his place in the Kaid's affection and on the Kaid's seat.

"She was like a mad woman and swore that the Kaid was putting your child before Raisul, patting the boy's head and raising him in his arms as though he were his son. . . . She was as one possessed of the devil, and swore that she would kill herself—until the Kaid was as wax in her hands. . . .

"Also she reviled your name, O mistress, and that of the Lady your mother whom she called a she-dog of a Nazrani—

the white sorceress who bewitched the great Kaid Mahommed Haroun, your father—and was the grandmother of your child. . . .

"Thus she railed fiercely against the child, yourself, and the lady your mother, as Nazrani dogs and infidels who could bring nothing but evil."

"Spoke she of my husband?" asked the slave's mistress.

"With bitter hatred," was the reply.

"And what said my brother, the Kaid?"

"He spoke soothingly but firmly, saying that your lord was as his right hand, as his shield, as his breast-plate. . . . And she saw that her words were vain. . . . Nor would he hear evil concerning thee, O my mistress, bidding her remember that you and he were children of the same father, the great Kaid Mahommed Haroun, on whom be peace."

"Is not my child—his nephew—the grandson of the great Kaid Mahommed Haroun?"

"And that is the child's offence . . . So he gave her the life of the child," whispered the slave, Miriam, and loosening her hair about her head, she buried her face in her hands and wept loudly.

"And the manner of his death?" asked the frightened but furious mother, savagely aroused and fiercely indignant.

"The Kaid, the compassionate and merciful, on whom be peace, sternly forbade murder. . . . He spoke of an accident, a fall from the battlements; the bite of a serpent; unwholesome *cous-cous;* a mad dog; a kidnapping by evil men. . . ."

"*So!* . . . And how long does the wife of my brother think she shall survive my child?" softly answered the lady El Isa Beth el Ain, whose mother had called her by her own Christian names, Elizabeth Elaine.

That unhappy woman and her husband, Captain Torson of the Garrison Artillery had been captured by savage and fanatical tribesmen during an adventurous holiday in Morocco. On the first day of the month they had been popular members of Gibraltar society. By the last day of that month his unburied body was the prey of jackals and vultures and she had been bought and sold in the marketplace of Mekazzen.

The distraught women talked endlessly, made plans, rejected them, prayed, plotted, racked their brains.

"Not one soul in this great castle, nor in all this town whom I can trust. . . . Yes, yes. I know that Hassan your brother is faithful and would die for me. . . . But what message could a dumb man give? . . . I cannot write, and dare not give him a writing if I could. . . ."

"Lady, you saved his life and you saved his eyes and his ears when the Kaid, the merciful, the compassionate, on whom be peace, had Hassan's tongue cut out. . . . His life is yours and his eyes and ears are keen. . . . He is brave as a lion and cunning as a fox. . . ."

"And cannot speak a word," said her mistress shortly.

The slave woman rose to her feet.

"But *I* can," she said, her face animated and ennobled by love, fidelity and courage. "*I* can. . . . Let me go with Hassan my brother. He shall guide and guard, and I shall speak. At the journey's end, I will be even as his tongue."

"Send my son, the light of mine eyes, the life of my soul. . . . My little son . . . out into the *bled* with dumb Hassan el Miskeen and you? . . . You two alone! . . . Hunger and thirst, exposure and danger, mountains and deserts, wild beasts and robbers. . . . It is *death*. . . ."

"And what if he stays here, Lady? . . . Death most certain. . . . Let me call Hassan, my brother, and let us start this night, trusting in the mercy of Allah and the help of Mahommed his prophet."

The Lady El Isa Beth el Ain, her knuckles pressing her teeth into her lip, stared with wild eyes at the face of her slave.

§ 2

The Kaid Haroun Abd'allah Karim laughed merrily—a hearty full-throated deep-chested laugh that shook him from head to foot, the while his fat face shone and beamed refulgent, with closing eyes, opening mouth and gleaming teeth —a veritable laughing cavalier. To some, especially his victims, the eyes, that became mere slits as he laughed, may have seemed foxy, the gleaming teeth wolfish; but they were naturally prejudiced persons.

The Kaid Haroun Abd'allah Karim laughed thus heartily when he was puzzled, annoyed, thwarted, injured, angry, or perturbed; and most heartily when concealing villainy, plotting treachery, or meditating some deed of revolting cruelty.

And thus it was, that when neither sleeping nor eating, the merry Kaid was smiling, chuckling, laughing heartily, or absolutely convulsed with uncontrollable mirth.

But, at what are known as jokes, the Kaid did not laugh at all, for he never saw what are known as jokes, and was wholly devoid of the normal sense of humour.

There were those who shrank suddenly, whose flesh crept upon their bones, and whose legs almost gave way beneath them, at the mere sound of the jolly Kaid's deep laughter.

. . . . . .

The present cause of the light-hearted Kaid's gay merriment was a miserable wretch who stood trembling with weakness and disease, as he boldly faced a firing-party of negro soldiers, his thumbs bound together behind his back with copper wire, his feet hobbled by a short chain which joined the iron shackles about his ankles. Behind him, the dirty white-washed wall, from four to five feet from the ground, was spotted, chipped, and pitted, by rifle bullets. It was a very high and extremely thick crenellated wall, and formed one side of a great courtyard. Opposite to it was a huge castle, of which at least the foundations were Phœnician, the exterior walls Roman, and the remainder ancient Moorish; itself the citadel of an ancient and walled city, a Holy City of the Faith.

On the stones of the vast and terrible dungeon, from which the prisoner had been brought up to the light of day, Phœnician trader, Roman soldier; Goth, Hun, and Vandal raider; Berber tribesmen, Spanish adventurer, and the seamen and soldiers of England, France, Spain, Holland, Italy, Austria and Turkey, had suffered and died.

In its darkest corners, beneath the chains that hung from great iron rings, still lay skeletons and the mouldering bones and rags of clothing of human beings; and, here and there, a dried and withered corpse, still contained in ancient steel and leather. Surely few would hear with dismay the summons that called them from such a place, though it bade them fare forth to look upon the face of Death. To what inmate of that dark and dreadful dungeon could Death be anything but a welcome friend?

So thought the prisoner, in his ignorance, as with uplifted chin, firm mouth and steady eye, he stared at the double

rank of soldiers, in their uniforms of red tarboosh, dark woollen tunic, baggy trousers and curly-toed shoes.

In their own language, the Kaid suddenly gave a sharp order, and a dozen rifles were levelled as one.

The prisoner did not flinch. The only change in the expression of his face was caused by the slight protrusion of his jaw, and the baring of his teeth. It was a strong soldierly face, and now remotely suggestive of that of a bull-dog.

A tense and terrible silence—in which all things animate and inanimate seemed breathlessly to await the fatal order. . . .

A sudden bark from the Kaid . . . and the rifles returned harmlessly to their original position. As the prisoner involuntarily flinched, the Kaid bellowed with joyous laughter —the deep peal of which was accompanied by a light treble tinkle from the little boy who leaned against his father's knee, and enjoyed the morning's sport with deep appreciation.

As the sound of the child's laughter died away, the Kaid rose from the comfortable chair in which he had been seated, European fashion, and, taking the child's hand in his strode across and placed himself to the left of the firing-party. With a frown, and the air of one who would say "A truce to this fooling," he again gave the order which brought the levelled rifles into position. For a full minute the soldiers stood like ebon statues, finger on trigger, while the prisoner stared unwaveringly into the muzzles of the rifles, and awaited the word that should be the last that he would hear.

Maintaining his air of one who has finished with trifling, the Kaid suddenly stretched forth his hand, and, with a loud cry of *"Fire,"* brought it to his side in swift dramatic sweep.

The unloaded rifles clicked harmlessly; the prisoner shrank back, the Kaid roared his delight, and the small boy laughed shrilly.

"Good! Good! oh, my father," he cried, clapping his tiny hands. "This dog dies many deaths."

"And will die many more, oh, Raisul. my son," smiled Haroun Abd'allah Karim.

"Now we really will shoot you, Nazrani cur," he shouted to the prisoner, in excellent French.

By way of reply, the prisoner did his best to spit in the direction of his tormentor.

Displaying excellent "Manual" drill, the soldiers loaded

their rifles to the words of command, stood at ease, at attention, at the "ready," at the "present." . . . This time there could be no deception. The prisoner had seen cartridges thrust into the chambers of the rifles.

Again raising his hand, the Kaid held the minute of suspense, and again swept his arm downward as he shouted *"Fire."*

As one, the twelve rifles crashed forth their rude roar of death and destruction, and, as one, a dozen bullets struck the wall behind the prisoner, who swayed untouched. His eyes flickered in a brief closing.

The boy Raisul jumped for joy, and screamed his delight at this fresh trick of torture, while his father's laugh reverberated about the courtyard and castle.

Suddenly the young Raisul Haroun Karim, turning, tugged at a great pistol which was supported by the voluminous belted sash that encircled his proud parent's portly person.

Graciously stooping, Haroun Abd'allah Karim permitted his son to draw it forth. Running to where his father's victim stood, the boy halted in front of him, rested the heavy pistol in the crook of his left elbow, placed its muzzle within a few inches of the man's stomach, closed his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

Again a harmless click.

The man stared at the boy, a look of wondering contempt mingling with incredulity and pity upon his grey face.

The laughter that followed this new and excellent jest was, this time, echoed from a heavily-latticed window high up in the castle wall. Looking up, the boy waved his hand to where a most lovely woman applauded his humorous essay. Following the boy's gaze the Kaid also turned the light of his countenance upon his amazing wife, Zainub—competent, brave, determined and as savagely cruel as himself—and smiled approvingly.

"Shall we keep the dog until to-morrow, or finish him now, oh, Raisul, my son?" he asked, as he lovingly patted the boy's head.

"Oh, now, if it please you, O my father," replied Raisul, with the improvidence of impetuous youth, "and let us not shoot him, but drop him on the hooks."

And he lifted up his eyes to where a thing dangled from a great hook high up on the wall of the castle keep. A man,

dressed in the rags of a uniform similar to that worn by the prisoner—the active service uniform of the French Foreign Legion—had been pushed through an embrasure some twenty feet above the sharp-pointed hook, had been caught on the hook, and had there hung and died.

The prisoner glanced aloft.

Poor old Pierre-le-Grand was dead now, anyhow. . . . Lucky devil! . . . But how he must have suffered before he died, hooked like that through the leg. That was no way for a man to die . . . upside down . . . like a sheep's carcase in a butcher's shop. . . . Poor old Pierre, with whom he had shared so many a bottle of good red wine . . . plastered on that wall like vermin nailed to a barn-door by a gamekeeper.

So they were going to drop him on a hook too, were they, to die in line with Pierre? Well, he had lived in line with Pierre for a long time. A rotten sort of death, but it might be quite quick if one were lucky.

And then, again, he might last for hours and days.

And suppose one were not caught by the hook at all? One would fall among that pack of mangy starving pariah dogs, with his arms and legs broken.

"It shall be as you like, my son," agreed the Kaid, patting the boy's shoulder, "but would it not be better to let the Christian cur have a merry night in which to contemplate the joys in store for him here, before he goes to those of hell?" and he quoted an Arab proverb to the effect that one cannot drink one's water and have it too.

"Your wisdom is great, O my father," replied the boy. "After we have prayed to-morrow, at sunrise, it shall be."

The Kaid Haroun Abd'allah Karim applauded boisterously, and explained to the prisoner that by the gracious and merciful condescension of the princeling, Raisul Haroun Karim, his life should be spared; that he should not be now shot as he so richly deserved; but that, at sunrise on the morrow, he should join his late comrade on the neighbouring hook.

He then gave an order to the Arab sergeant, in command of the firing squad who marched the soldiers to the guard-room in one of the great square towers that formed the corners of the vast courtyard.

To one of the retinue of officers, officials, scribes, relatives, dependents and servants grouped about his chair, he issued

instructions for what he termed the comfort of the captive.

A couple of negroes sped away, and, before long, could be seen lowering, by means of a stout chain, a great three-armed grapnel, relic of the days of the Sallee rovers, those Barbary Corsairs whom the Kaid's ancestors had so often led to victory and loot. As this came to rest, a few feet beneath the hook, the Kaid bade his captive note that, should he unfortunately miss his proper and appointed resting-place, one of the sharp points of the grapnel would undoubtedly rectify matters, and prevent disappointment for all concerned.

Withdrawing his fascinated gaze from the dangling body of his friend, the prisoner looked his captor in the face, and, in English, replied with the simple observation,

"You *dirty* dog."

Book I

THE YOUTH OF OTHO BELLÊME

PART I

CHAPTER I

HAD it been your good fortune to sojourn upon His Majesty's Ship *Terrific* on the East India Station, some years ago, you would have been privileged to behold Josephus Mummery.

Probably he would have been pointed out to you as Young Joe Mum'ry, or, perchance, as Basher Mum'ry, for by these titles was he known, and widely known, throughout His Majesty's Navy.

His rank was not exalted, for he was but an Able Seaman —and none too "able" in the opinion of divers Chief Petty Officers, who suffered him gladly—but his fame was great, for he was Heavy-Weight Champion of the Navy, and, in the opinion of competent judges, quite likely to become Heavy-Weight Champion of the World.

In possession of the twin jewels, Success and Ambition, he was a happy man, with a happiness darkened by but two small clouds, one no bigger than a man's hand and the other no bigger than a woman's.

As to the first, there was a blighted perisher, Matty Maykins, going about calling himself Heavy-Weight Champion of the East, and Young Joe Mummery could not catch him at it.

Greatly he yearned to encounter this gentleman and to point out to him, with both hands, that Young Joe Mummery was in the East, and inasmuch as he was Heavy-Weight Champion of His Majesty's Navy, both West and East, he, and he alone, was the lawful and proper Champion of the East.

Joe's argument may not have been strictly conclusive, but he felt that an argument *ad hominem* would be entirely so, and it irked him grievously that he could not make it—and a lot of gate-money incidentally.

The other cloud upon his fair young horizon was occasioned by the prolonged silence of Mary Hawkins, whom he dearly

loved, and to whom he had always written with the utmost regularity, once every year, or so.

They had met in Tonbury, loved in rapture, and parted in anger—on the subject of pugilism, which Mary abhorred as Low—and Joe had gone straightway back, down to the sea in ships, as an Able Seaman of the King; and Mary straightway back, down to the kitchen in pink print, as the able cook of Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, who, having long appreciated the work of her hands, welcomed her return with, literally, open arms.

So the thoughts of Josephus Mummery, long as greyhounds, slow and tenacious as bulldogs, clung about Matthew Maykins, self-styled Champion of the East, and about Mary Hawkins, rightly styled sweetheart of Josephus Mummery.

§ 2

This Matthew Maykins was indeed a mighty man of his hands, professional pugilist, bookmaker, horse-dealer, and licensed victualler, wise in his generation and his ring-craft, praised and proclaimed throughout the wide Orient wherever British soldiers and sporting British civilians do congregate.

From Aden to Hong-Kong, from Peshawar to Colombo, the fame of his victories was spread abroad. Regimental, Brigade and Divisional champions of the Army he had uniformly defeated in Karachi, Bombay, Poona, Secunderabad, Calcutta, Colombo, Rangoon, Singapore and wherever else there arose men of prowess and note, until at last, when he travelled about his fairly lawful occasions, from race-meeting to race-meeting, from cantonment to cantonment, and from port to port, none was found to accept his challenge nor to dispute his claim to championship.

And as Matty Maykins sat upon the Peak in Hong-Kong, and sighed fresh Eastern worlds to conquer, Josephus Mummery sat upon the fore-deck of H.M.S. *Terrific* and sighed fresh news to get of Matty Maykins.

And this veracious story has no concern whatever with Matthew Maykins, save in that his name was what it was, and greatly resembled that of Doctor Matthias Maykings, a wholly different person.

CHAPTER II

PLANTERS are cheery birds as a class, and, to vary the metaphor, are of the salt of the earth, as well as priceless old beans, great nuts, stout fellas, *some* lads, and sound sportsmen. When a party of them from Malaya, Borneo, New Guinea, or the South Sea Islands invades a homeward-bound liner and chances to pick up another party from India, Ceylon or Burma at the merry port of Colombo, the planter is perhaps seen at his cheeriest, saltiest, beaniest, and nuttiest; and repays study.

Promptly the party forms a "gin-club," and to it, in the smoking-room, quickly gravitates all that there is in the ship of the most cheery, salt, beansome, nutritious and sportive.

Sometimes other elements, under false pretence of being priceless old beans, intrude and cause friction, until, self-revealed for what they are, respectable, prudent, virtuous and narrow—or, perchance, bumptious and bounderish,—swift ejection follows.

Such a Bœotian was a foolish youth who, being filled with pride, pegs, *paus, stengahs,* sours, slings, *paights,* and mingled alcoholic marvels, did raise his glass not, as customarily, toward his own silly face, but toward that of Doctor Matthias Maykings, who had merely called him a damned little squirt.

Luckily, his friend, less drunk, seized his arm ere he could throw the contents of his glass, a gin-and-vermouth, at the bigger man, and then ran him out of the smoking-room on to the promenade-deck of the ship—the P. & O. *Medina,* off Colombo.

"You priceless, godforsaken, dam-fool dribbler," hissed the friend as he banged the drunken one against the taffrail. "Do you know who that *is?*"

"Lemme go," shouted the Bœotian, "an' I'll show'm who *I* am. Leggo m'arm. Lemme gettattim. . . ."

"Yes," sneered the friend-indeed. "*Do.* You do. Just show him. He's only Matty Maykins, Champion Heavy-Weight of the East. Go and show him. Go on. *Show* him."

But the drunken one suddenly became almost sober, and turned somewhat pale.

"My hat!" he whispered. "And I was just going to bung a 'ver-gin' in his eye."

He collapsed limply against the rail and licked dry lips.

"How d'y' know?" he asked feebly.

"I was seeing the Head Waiter in the Saloon this morning, about getting ol' Fatty Coleman next to us when the seats were being re-shuffled as the Colombo lot came on. This chap came up at the same time and asked where he was to sit.

"'*Just come on, Sir? What name?*' says the Head Waiter. '*Yes,*' says this chap. '*My name's Maykins.*'

"'*What initial, Sir?*' asked the Head Waiter.

"'*M.,*' answers the bloke. And then I asked him plump. '*Excuse me, but are you* MATTY *Maykins?*' He put on a haughty sort of stare and said, '*My name* IS *Matthias Maykins, since you are good enough to inquire, but I don't think I have met you.*' . . . MET me, by Gum! . . . I'd be sorry to 'meet' Matty Maykins, undefeated Heavy-Weight Champion of the East, what?"

Nor has this story any further concern with these young gentlemen, save that they spread abroad upon the *Medina* the belief that Doctor Matthias Maykings of Ootacamund was Matty Maykins of the East in general, bookmaker, horse-dealer, hotel-proprietor, race-horse owner, and professional bruiser.

§ 2

At school, Doctor Matthias Maykings had been known, and approved, as Piggy Maykings. At Oxford, he had borne the honourable term of endearment, Porky. At Ootacamund, he was the popular Tubby Maykings, a good man across country with the Ooty Hunt, a good man at the bed-side of a sick person, a good man at the bar, the piano, the card-table, the billiard-table, and the dinner-table.

He having been severally Piggy, Porky and Tubby, it will, rightly, be assumed that he was solid of figure. Solid he was and square; square and solid of jaw and neck, thickset, heavy and bluff, with the face and air of a prize-fighter; bull-throated, bullet-headed, short-necked, and hard-eyed.

And, beneath all this, Doctor Matthias Maykings was as

mild and gentle a soul as ever abhorred personal violence and avoided personal danger. He loathed the idea of taking active part in fighting of any kind, as much as he envied and admired fighting-men of every sort. Thousands of good fights had he seen; never in one had he been seen. Not once in his life had he had a boxing-glove on his hand, nor missed a boxing-match that he had had the opportunity of seeing. To look like a pugilist was his ambition; to "follow" pugilism was his delight; and to be consulted upon the subject of pugilism, to be asked to judge or to referee at a fight, was his pride and joy.

Sometimes had he been almost tempted to spell his name *Maykins,* instead of *Maykings,* when the great Champion of the East was in India, defeating all comers, from Colombo to Simla and from Calcutta to Peshawar. Nor did he ever find it easy to deny relationship to the famous boxer, when asked by those who were misled by the similarity of name, as to whether he were a "connection" of that gentleman.

Judge, then, of the irresistible strength of the terrible temptation that assailed him now, when it dawned upon him that the gin-club, formed at Singapore, believed him, the new-comer at Colombo, actually to be *Matthew Maykins, Heavy-Weight Champion of the East!*

When Wilbur, of Kuala Lumpur in Selangor, laughingly alluded to himself as a possible challenger and competitor for the Belt, Doctor Maykings was on the point of explaining. But he remained on the point—an uncomfortable position in which he was severely pricked by his conscience.

When Brandon, of Penang, big and burly amateur boxer, asked him if he'd put them on with him, play light, and give the public a treat, if he could raise a set of gloves, Doctor Maykings laughed uneasily,—and Brandon modestly decided that the Champion did not wish to injure him accidentally.

When he stepped out of his cabin on the promenade deck, for a breath of cool early-morning air, clad simply in tennis shirt and flannel trousers, and Longleigh of Seremban in Negri Sembilan, pointing to his black and white cricket-belt, asked if it were the Championship Belt, he smiled upon the young man and asked him what the devil he was talking about.

When old Froude, of Taiping in Perak, asked him if he

were going to Europe to have a shot at the World's Championship, he said:

"Oh, ask me another," and looked rather annoyed.

"Depend upon it, that's precisely what he *is* after," said old Froude, in the bar. "What's more—I'd back him too. . . . Begad, I would! I'd back him. . . . I like him, begad! . . . Back him without knowing who he was up against, too. . . . I like him, begad!"

Which was just what old Froude would do—back anybody he liked, through thick and thin and against all probabilities; one of the many traits which endeared the sinful old reprobate to all who came within range of the warming rays of his genial kindliness.

And he got the worthy doctor to hold forth to the gin-club on the respective merits of the world's great boxers, the coming men, the American crouch, the kidney-punch, and the folly of allowing negroes to compete with white men for the World's Championship.

All of which, Dr. Maykings was admirably competent to discuss, for had he not followed the theory of boxing from his youth up, and was he not a member of the National Sporting Club, and very much at home in the saddle of his hobby whenever he chose to mount it?

And the planters of the gin-club, men from the uttermost wilds of Malaya, Sumatra, Borneo, New Guinea, Assam, Ceylon and the Islands, none of whom had ever seen the real original Maykins, firmly believed that this fine fellow was he; and sat, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, as the learned doctor spoke expertly of the shock of the chin-punch to the *Medulla oblongata,* owing to the leverage of the jaw from the "point" to the odontoid peg, causing a man to be "put to sleep and take the count"; of the solar plexus, of nerve ganglia, of the *rectus abdominis* muscles, and of many other matters within his ken, both as a doctor and a student of the theory of the noble art of self-defence.

Never once did he say, "I am Matty Maykins, Heavy-Weight Champion of the East," but neither did he ever state the contrary, though he well knew that everybody on board, passengers and crew alike, believed him to be that person.

Never before had he been happier, and when the Captain, a keen sportsman and devotee of pugilism, singled him out for special honour, his cup was full.

"I've wanted to see you for years," he would say, "but you have never been in the same port as me. Come up to my cabin and have your coffee after dinner, Mr. Maykins"; and the heart of the doctor would swell within him as he sat and tasted the Captain's rare old brandy, and gazed fascinated at the long pendulum that hung like a plumb-line down across a kind of huge clock-face on the cabin-wall, and registered the angle of list to which the ship rolled, when roll she did.

"Been having a chat with the Skipper, up in his cabin," he would say nonchalantly, as he rejoined the gin-club in the smoking-room at the after-end of the promenade deck, and the gin-club would welcome him even more warmly and perceive an enhanced brightness about his halo. Straightway the conversation would turn to the Noble Art, partly out of compliment to the hero, and partly because the subject was congenial and interesting to all those beansome and nut-like salts of the earth.

On the night before the *Medina* put in to Bombay (an unusual procedure for an Australian boat, necessitated by the dislocation of the Bombay-Aden "ferry" service), Dr. Maykings surpassed himself as Sir Oracle, and certainly gave the gin-club a very merry evening—which ended at 4 a.m.,—inasmuch as every man had an opportunity of displaying his knowledge of the gentle and joyous pastime of which they all hailed Dr. Maykings as a master.

"No," he said, firmly and impressively, "I do *not* blame John L. Sullivan for refusing to meet Peter Jackson. I would have done the same myself."

"You see, he *is* out for the World's Championship," whispered old Froude to young Brandon. "You see'f he don't have a shot at it. . . . I'll back him too, begad! . . . I like him! He's a gentleman as well as a sport. . . ." And young Brandon of Penang quite agreed.

Certainly the Champion was a most gentlemanly person, and, the more he drank, the more mellifluous became his periods, the more cultured his accent. Almost too cultured for that of a bruiser, even in those days of progress and uplift.

"Where would be the sense of matching a greyhound to fight a bulldog, or a bulldog to course against a greyhound? Where would be the sense in arranging a duel between a

fencing-master armed with an Italian rapier, and a butcher armed with a cleaver? . . . No, gentlemen, pit bulldog against bulldog, greyhound against greyhound, swordsman against swordsman, and butcher against butcher. Also negro against negro, and white man against white man."

Loud cheers.

The gin-club swore he was most obviously right; but Wilbur of Kuala Lumpur, who had been at Winchester and Oxford,—and whom his twenty-first drink made a little captious,—murmured something about *retarius* being pitted against *gladiator* in the brave days of old and the Roman arena.

"Precisely," continued Dr. Maykings, "and so obviously absurd and fantastically nonsensical was this matching of the unmatchable, this comparing of the incomparable, this —er—piteously pitiable pitting of the unpittable (very loud cheers), this setting of a man equipped with a net and trident to fight one armed with sword and shield, that it is remembered to this day! It was the sign and seal of the decadence of a once great nation, jaded, degraded, and ever lustful of new and bizarre things. . . . Should we copy them? . . . *No!* . . . We want no *retarius* versus *gladiator* nowadays, and no negro versus white man—an equally fantastic and bizarre conception. . . ." (*"Hear, hear!"*)

"He won't fight any negro aspirant to the World's Championship, once he's got it himself—and don't blame him," observed old Froude to young Brandon.

"Matching a bull against a race-horse!" continued the worthy doctor, well astride his hobby, and enjoying, alas, his false position, with every fibre of his being. "Why, a negro is a creature of infinitely lower development of nervous organization. His nervous—er—works, as it were, compared with those of a white man, are as the works of a mangle compared with those of a watch! . . . Consider the relative effects of the blow of a hammer upon a mangle and of the same blow upon a watch! . . . No, gentlemen, the negro is so much lower in the scale of creation, so much less delicate in his nervous adjustments, so much less susceptible to shock, that the contest between him and a white man of equal strength and skill is manifestly and grossly unfair. . . ." (*"Hear, hear!"* . . . Loud cheers. . . .)

"And," observed Longleigh of Seremban, with owlish

gravity, "he's got a thick-*hic,* I mean t' say, a thick-*hicker* skull."

"Precisely," agreed the doctor, bowing towards him, "as you say, the negro has a thicker skull. . . . So let none sneer at my old friend John L. Sullivan for drawing the colour line, nor jeer at him as an American Friend of Freedom, Fraternity and Equality, who so despises his black brother that he will not admit him to competition in his sports. . . . No. Let John meet his Fitzsimmonses, his Charlie Mitchells, his Jake Kilrains, and his Jim Corbetts, and leave the negro alone. . . . Have a White Champion *and* a Black Champion, if you like, but don't ask them to meet—until you ask dog to race horse, and match the winner of the Waterloo Cup against the winner of the Derby. . . ." Tumultuous cheering and a babble of agreement and applause.

And then old Froude, rising, slightly unsteadily, to his feet, raised his glass and the question agitating the breasts of the company.

"Gentlemen, Planters, Friends and other—I mean of course that we are all friends, though some of us are Planters —by which I don't mean we're gentlemen though planters, I mean, oh, damn it all!—here's to *the Future White Champion of the World,* Matt Maykins, sportsman and gentleman, whom we're proud to meet and intend to put our last-shirts and bottom-dollars on, when he steps into the ring to claim the Championship, and I'm damn glad I came Home by this boat, and when he fights for the Championship, I'll go to the other side of the world to see him do it, an' if he goes down—why so do I—and every penny I've got in the world. Gentlemen, to the Future White Heavy-Weight Champion of the World. . . . I like him!

"'For he's a jolly good fe-e-e-e-llow,'" . . .

And the gin-club stood in a circle round the radiant, blushing Dr. Maykings, bawling the old Pæan of Praise at the tops of their voices.

§ 3

As the worthy doctor undressed that night, or morning, he saw the world through a roseate haze. He felt that he

was a popular jolly-good fellow, a man to whom sportsmen sat and listened with deep interest, a man whom they admired and to whom they looked up, a person of the highest consideration in their circle—if not exactly the Champion of the East proceeding to Europe to challenge the Champion of the World to defend, or lose, his proud title.

This voyage was a fitting climax to the happy time he'd had in India. He half wished that Rosie and the boy and girl were on board, that they might see him the honoured centre of sporting society, the admired President of everything the passengers got up, undisputed Lord of the Gin-club, him whom the Captain delighted to honour, the man of whom the Planters made much, *arbiter elegantiarum,* acclaimed by common consent to be a priceless old bean, a cheery bird, one of the best, an authentic nut, of the salt of the earth, *some* lad, and a sound sportsman.

But then Rosie might have given him away, indignantly denying that her Matty was a nasty prize-fighter, and affirming that he was a doctor, a darling, and the best of husbands, fathers and friends. . . . No—just as well that Rosie and the boy and girl were at home.

What a joy to see them again, and to return to the dear old house at Yelverbury, wherein his father had lived and practised to the day of his death.

India was all very well and he had enjoyed his time there, and certainly he had enjoyed, to the full, the years since Rosie had taken the children home—but, after all, there was no place like England, and no part of it like Kent.

Still . . . he had enjoyed his last two years—when he had been free to give rein to his imagination without fear of things being spoilt by dear Rosie's literalness and narrow-minded worship of mere fact—and he might have prolonged it into another year but for Bellême's piteous appeal. He certainly might.

He had packed Rosie off when the children had begun to need schooling, and had stayed, himself, to wind things up. He had moved into the Club during the winding-up process, and had remained there after its completion.

How quickly a couple of years had slipped away—with the hunting, picnics, shooting, cards, dancing, billiards. Ripping time. . . . (Cavernous yawn.) Poor old Bellême seemed to be in a bad way. . . . Rotten. Not much good

being Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême if all you owned was a stack of debts and a wife who had formerly been your kitchen-maid and then your cook! . . . Poor old Bellême, or Bellamy or Blame, as they called him in those parts. Things were different from when he had been the cleverest scholar, finest athlete, and most fashionable buck, at Oxford. . . . Ah, those were good old days. . . . (More cavernous yawns.) Blast that ship's bell—why, it must be five o'clock in the morning. . . . And Dr. Matthias Maykings bade himself good night with some asperity.

CHAPTER III

JOSEPHUS MUMMERY, A.B., No. 78698, of H.M.S. *Terrific,* clad in the greyish white "rig of the day" and wearing a straw hat of the shape affected by small children at the seaside, leant with folded arms upon the stone parapet of the upper verandah of the Seamen's Rest, near the Apollo Bunder at Bombay, and pondered many things.

Chiefly he thought of that blighted perisher, Matty Maykins, who called himself Champion of the East. Also he thought long and longingly of that lovely lass, Mary Hawkins. And with both these persons did he earnestly desire converse.

From the perisher he wanted to knock the stuffing, and from the lovely lass he wanted to obtain an explanation of her unbroken silence.

For many long weary years had Josephus Mummery written to her sweet letters of love, or rather had caused to be written to her sweet letters of love, with most unfailing regularity and punctuality,—every year or so,—ever since they had quarrelled and parted; quarrelled over his indignant refusal to give up vulgar prize-fighting as soon as they should marry; and parted in wrath over the bitter words that their hot and sore young hearts had put into their foolish mouths.

Another letter was about due now, and around its composition the mind of Joseph worked, what time it did not pursue the elusive Matty Maykins or some other thing of nought.

Before his indifferent eyes was spread a ceaselessly changing and kaleidoscopic mosaic of colour, as men and women of all the nations of the earth, and hybrids between them, went to and fro about their lawful occasions, towards and from the Apollo Bunder, the Cooperage, the Ballard Pier, the Customs House, the Victoria Terminus, the schools, the offices, the dockyards, the slums, the shops and the hotels.

In front of the Seamen's Rest was a vast space, mansion-surrounded, into which debouched the roads leading to and from these various places.

Bullock-carts plied between the *bunders* and the Colaba cotton-yard, and *ticca-gharries* between the Yacht Club, Watson's Hotel, the Great Western Hotel, the Apollo Hotel, and the terminus of the Great Indian Peninsula Railway.

In brilliant-coloured turbans and coats, or *saris* and petticoats, went Mussulman and Hindu, man and woman of every race of India, as well as Arab, Chinese, Persian, Negro, Afghan, Cingalee, Burman, Jap and Russian, Turk, Jew and Infidel.

Gazing upon this thrilling and wonderful scene, stood Joseph Mummery, and his lips moved constantly. A careful listener might have caught the words:

"Mess 6. . . . *H.M.S. 'Terrific.'*

"Dear Mister,—You call yourself the Heavy-Weight Champion of the East. I am the Heavy-Weight Champion of the British Navy, Joe Mummery, A.B., No. 78698. *Wot about it? I reckon that when my ship's on the China Station or East Indies,* I *am the Champion of the East, wotsumdever you may be when I am not. Hoping to hear by return as you reckon I'm a perishin' liar in considerin' you the same, I am, Sir, yours most respectful, Joe Mummery, A.B., No.* 78698. *H.M.S. 'Terrific,' Heavy-Weight Champion o' th' British Navy, and wot about it?"*

And following thereupon the words:

"Mess 6. . . . *H.M.S. 'Terrific.'*

"Dear Mary Hawkins,—Ever faithful, ever true, my heart has ever been to you. Which poetry I made by myself, and any perishing blighter that says I didn't is a . . . no, that won't do. . . . *Dear Mary Hawkins, Ever faithful, ever true, my heart has ever been to you. Which poetry I made by myself and any perish—er—any gentleman that says I am not, is a . . . is quite mistaken. I am now writing these few lines hoping they find you in the pink as they now leave me at present. You haven't written any answer to my last three letters, my dear Mary, one from Plymouth, and one from Yokohama, and one from Jamaica, and now this is the fourth. I am reformed as I told you in my last two letters. Seeing that you despise boxing and fighting, I have given it up and reformed. From the moment you told me how you hated all quarrelling and boxing and sparring and fighting I gave it up and repented, alas, too late. I had joined the Navy before I saw the error of my ways. If any bloke gives me a punch*

on the wrong side, I turn unto him the right side also, as our Chaplain saith. I do love you truly, Mary, and as you have not written to me I do hope you've not gone wrong. . . . In your head, I mean, of course. No, as you were. Cut that out and carry on from where *'I do love you truly, Mary,' I do. I never think of anything else, and spend all my time making up this letter to you. I am truly reformed, Mary, and never box, and am much respected by my Captain and Officers. Strike me blind, I . . .* No, cut that out. *I do love you, so truly, Mary, and when we pay off at Devonport, I am coming straight to Yelverbury to see how you are ablowing, and to bring you a ring, Mary—a ring without any diamonds, or anything else in it. And when we're married, I'm going to challenge the Heavy-Weight Champion of the World and you shall roll in your carriage alongside me, turning up our noses at matlows and tiffies and such. We'll drive up and down all the roads of the Three Towns, pitying and patronising all the women who have married poor sailor-men-that-use-the-sea . . .* no cut that out—from the *'ring'*—it doesn't sound so reformed. . . . *And when we're spliced . . . we'll live happy ever after in a coast-guard's cottage with roses trailing over the porch, and pigs and chickens, and yours most respectfully Joe Mummery, A.B., No.* 78698, *Heavy-Weight Champion of the British Navy . . .* No, cut that last bit out. . . ."

A large young man, clad in similar "rig of the day," rolled into the front garden of the Seaman's Rest and cocked a searching eye aloft.

"Joe Mummery, ahoy!" he bawled.

"Alow there!" bawled Joseph in reply.

"He's been sighted," roared the other.

"Who has?" inquired Joseph at the top of his stentorian voice.

"Matt Maykins, Heavy-Weight Champion of the East," was the reply that caused Mummery to stiffen suddenly as does a dog who comes in sight of another dog that must be abolished. "His ship's put in here. It's lying in the stream now, it is. . . . And he's coming ashore to have a game of billiards, he is. . . . At the *Apollo* over there he is. . . ."

His voice grew husky with excitement and prolonged effort to outroar the noisy passing traffic.

"Come you up aloft here, Bill, you perishing, pink-eyed

pimple-nosed old poll-parroting pumpkin-headed, poodle-eared Pottifer," roared Joseph, and his friend disappeared beneath the porch of the building, and, for all his huge bulk, ran lightly up the stone steps.

"Say all that sermon again, you kaggin' banger," requested Joseph, as Bill appeared behind the mosquito-curtained bed that almost blocked the doorway from the dormitory to the verandah.

"It's like this, look," complied William Bossom. "That Merchant Service ship, the *Medina,* that they call P. & O. —Plain and 'Olesome, I suppose—it puts in here this mornin'. See? . . . And her Pay or Sawbones or Purser or something, he comes on the Beach, he does, and in his boat is young 'Arry Blacker as aperiently it turns out is own brother to old Bandy Blacker off the *Terrific!* See? Well old Bandy Blacker was just agoing back from shore leaf when he sees young 'Arry Blacker that's his own brother and is likewise sick-bay steward or deck-hand or engine-room tiffy or quarter-master or Capting or somethink on this 'ere Merchant Service ship, *Medina.* When he sees him, he puts aside his pride and he ups and owns to him bein' his brother, and he sings out:

" *'Strike me peculiar perishin' purple if it's not my young brother 'Arry that's in the Merchant Service,'* he hollers—and off they goes, of course, to wet it. See?"

"And what the hell's all that got to do with Matty Maykins, you blethering, blob-faced, blattering, blink-eyed, blue-nosed blundering blighter?" interrupted the young impatient Joseph.

"I'd tell you if you c'd only shut your silly trumpeting tripe-trap for 'alf a mo'," was the reply. "Can't git a word in edgeways. Not no-how. Not with you jabbering like a brass monkey with its end frozen off. . . .

"What I was trying to tell you was, that when old Bandy Blacker says that he's going to break leaf and get as drunk as David's sow to show he's glad he's met his long-lost brother that's in the Merchant Service, I ups and says it ain't for me, at my time of life, to desert a ship-met in trouble, or looking for trouble—and off I goes with old Bandy Blacker and this young 'Arry Blacker that's in the Merchant Service, off to Grant Road.

"Well, we shoves a shout athwart a *ticker* and it heaves to and we boards it, having given the bloke his course. Then

we sits down aft, and then we have to persuade old Bandy that he can't go up on the bridge and steer the horse—him keepin' on saying he wants to feel how it looks havin' the tiller-ropes in front of him and all; and weepin' bitterly because we dispersuades him and tells him he's drunk—and so he is."

"And once again, William Fat-Headed Bossom, *what the hell's this to do with Matty Maykins?* Tell me that before I forget your infirmities and set about you," broke in Josephus Mummery, shaking a colossal fist beneath the nose of the indignant William.

"God love us, *ain't I tellin' you all the time,* you yelping yellow-back!" he remonstrated. "Ain't I telling you as fast as I can talk, if you'd shut your shark-hole half a minute! . . . What I was trying to say when you interrupted was, that all of a sudden, young 'Arry Blacker, him that is aperiently own brother to old Bandy Blacker off the *Terrific,* he suddenly ups and says:

"'*We got the Heavy-Weight Champion of the East aboard, we 'ave,*' he says. '*Going home to challenge the Heavy-Weight Champion of the World, he is,*' he says.

"'*What,*" says I. '*You say that again, young 'Arry Blacker,*' I says, and he says it again, and thereupon old Bandy Blacker ups and dots him one, brother or no brother, long lost or new-foundling—he don't care anything about that. . . . No. He gives him a smack on the nose, to teach him who's Champion of the East and not to talk nonsense. . . . Fair tapped his claret—all over his white shore-goin' ducks! O, a horrible mess! . . . *Laugh!* I didn't half laugh! Nearly burst myself, I did.

"'*Don't you tell no perishing lies, young 'Arry Blacker,*' says old Bandy Blacker. '*We got the perishing Heavy-Weight Champion of the British Navy aboard the* Terrific, *and wheresoever the* Terrific *goes, the Champion of them parts* is HIM. *See?*' he says. '*An' don't you go for to forget it neither,*' he says. '*Champion of the East aboard your measly Merchant Service ship be blowed!*' he says. '*You tell that to the Pongoes,*' he says, very kindly helping young 'Arry to mop himself up. '*When the* Terrific's *IN the East, Young Joe Mummery's Champion* OF the East,' he says.

"And then he lets a yell and claws hold of the gharry-

wallah's jumper, and nigh heaves him off the perishing bridge, thereby causing the *ticker* to deviate seven points from course and narrowly avoiding collision through not keepin' station.

"'*Here!*' hollers old Bandy. '*Heave to, you perishin' pirate. 'Bout ship,*' and says he's goin' to put back to port to tell young Joe Mummery all about this bloke that calls himself Champion of the East. . . . And I ups and says he can proceed on his course along with his brother, in love and harmony, to Grant Road, and I'd come back and give you the wheeze so that you can lay for this bloke and learn him. . . . And 'ere I am, Joe," concluded Mr. Bossom.

Josephus Mummery forthwith gave a realistic imitation of a French gentleman whom he had seen at Toulon, welcoming another French gentleman, presumably a long-lost friend newly restored to him after prolonged sojourning in distant wilds.

"Embracey-moy, mong army," quoth Mr. Mummery, hurling himself upon William's breast, flinging his arms about his neck, and saluting him upon either hairy cheek. Having visited Toulon, Nice, Monte Carlo and Cannes, Josephus rather fancied his French accent and ways.

"*And* the perisher's spending the day on the Beach, at the pubs," continued William, when released from the embrace. "So this young 'Arry Blacker says—the deck-steward or some such ratin' having told him that he'd overheard the Champion makin' it up with his Townies to challenge the lot of 'em at billiards at the Apoller 'Otel, over there, this very day; and the whole gang's going to see the match. . . . Tiffin and dinner ashore they're going to have; so I reckon you've got him at last, Joe," and Mr. Bossom did a few steps of the hornpipe dance.

Joseph hung a moment in thought.

"You've got to write me a letter, Bill, and then you've got to go and get all the *Terrifics* you can lay your ugly paws on, and give them the glad news—to be here about eight bells—while I go to the *Bombay Gazette* office and get hold of that writing bloke that does the sporting page. . . . Come on below now and get the letter done, and you see that it's posted all right, if this bloke takes me perishing young life."

"You don't want to write any letters to him," expostulated William, in some confusion of mind, as he followed

Joseph to the reading-room, "you only want to lay for him and say,

"'*You the Perishing Champion of the blooming East? Then take that!*' . . . See, Joe?"

But William was bidden to stow his gab, was pushed roughly into a chair in front of a writing-table, and requested to be careful what he wrote. He accordingly seized paper and pen, squared his arms, bowed his head, protruded his tongue, and wrote:

Mess 6. *H.M.S. "Terrific,"*

My dear Sir, still under the misapprehension that the letter was to be a cartel to the *soi-disant* Champion.

To this he added *Mary Hawkins* as his friend dictated, and continued:

My dear Sir Mary Hawkins,—Ever faithful, ever true, my hart has ever bin to you. Which pottery I made up by myself while thinking about you my dear Mary Hawkins and any perishing blighter as says I did not is a—no, as you were—cut that out and say you know the sort of thing I mean he is quite wrong. I now take up my pen my dear Mary to write you these few lines hoping they find you as they leave me in the pink, and so on, even as Josephus had excogitated it for weeks. . . . A letter that caused some puzzlement and not a little heart-searching when in due course it reached the fair hands of Mary; and of which the gist was that the writer, as he had frequently stated, bitterly regretted his rash flight on the day after the quarrel, still loved her with an undying and unabating love, was a wholly reformed character, never drank nor used language, utterly abhorred pugilism in all its manifestations, and was coming home to marry her at an early date. And if she was now walking out with Another he'd put such a head on him that his own mother would be slow to recognise her child.

CHAPTER IV

A CARE-FREE, blythe and joyous man was Dr. Matthias Maykings as he mounted the saloon-companion of the *Medina* after a hearty breakfast. He carolled gaily as he stepped out on to the deck and gazed upon the beautiful palm-feathered islands and shore of Bombay Harbour. Having feasted his eyes, he crossed to the starboard side and admired the lovely view of the Queen of Cities, where she sate enthroned beneath a purple canopy of haze, from Malabar Hill and Back Bay even unto Sewri.

"Mother—er—Queen—er—Royal and Dower Royal," he murmured, trying to quote forgotten lines of verse that he had read or heard . . .

> "'Bombay,' Mother of Cities,
> Or Aunt, as the case may be . . .'

No, that wasn't it. It was something about . . ."

"Play pills, Maykins?" inquired old Froude, strolling up and lighting his first cheroot of the day's long procession. "Sure to, though."

"Rather," replied the doctor, who had recently won the Ootacamund Club Billiard Tournament from scratch, and knew that unless there were a very remarkably good player on board, he could certainly hold his own at billiards, at any rate.

"Billiard Champion of the East, too?" asked young Brandon, coming up with Longleigh and overhearing the question and answer.

"Oh, nonsense! Get out!" smiled the happy doctor. But of his really unusual skill at this game, of his very beautiful tenor voice, of his great artistic genius (he had been "hung" several times at the Simla show, and might have been at the Academy), he was not in the least degree proud: nor was he of the fact that he was a noted bridge-player, a violinist worth hearing, a crack shot, and a first-class golfer. . . . To be erroneously supposed to be a distinguished bruiser gave

him infinitely greater pleasure than to be praised, admired and envied for the many things that he could do exceedingly well. Which, after all, is no very rare phenomenon.

"Well,—tell you what," replied old Froude, as the deck-steward brought the doctor the cigarette-case for which he had sent him. "We'll all adjourn ashore to the *Apollo,* and you shall challenge the lot of us—one down, t'other come on, what? . . . Maykins versus the gin-club, what? . . . And I'll lay anyone ten to one in quids that nobody puts up seventy-five against you, what?" . . . and off he toddled to the smoking-room to put ten to one on the billiards of a man of whose form he knew absolutely nothing. (But he liked him, begad, he liked him!)

It was a right cheery party that emerged through a sally-port doorway in the side of the *Medina,* trooped down the gangway and spread itself over the upper deck of the tender, *Guicowar,* that morning.

And on the lower deck of that same tender was one Harry Blacker, laden with a commission from the Purser and with bodeful information which Fate decreed he should impart to a seaman of the *Terrific,* his chance-met and well-beloved brother, known and admired as Old Bandy Blacker.

Past the island-fort, bristling with grim, grey guns, athwart the stems or the sterns of tall ships from all the ends of the earth, toward the ancient wall of the Fort and the Ballard Pier, chugged the *Guicowar,* and all unconscious of his fate, the merry doctor played—played at being what he was not, a bold bad bruiser, even while his æsthetic and artistic mind revelled in the sight of bubble domes, aspiring minarets and gracious towers, the sky-line of Bombay the Beautiful.

But little of the Beautiful was evident to the most earnest seeker, about the dirty pier, the huge corrugated iron sheds of the Customs, the damp-stained peeling walls of the go-downs and warehouses without, or the mean streets of rookeries, tenement houses and *chawls* that lay between the pier and the Victoria Terminus; Bombay, approached from the back, being about as lovely as a stage scene beheld from the same point of view.

The gin-club and its most admired member, having packed themselves into *ticca-gharries,* compared the Queen of Cities unfavourably with the places from which they respectively

hailed, and, as they drove along, stated that she was not a patch on Honolulu, Colombo, Sourabaya, Mandalay, Bangkok, Manilla, Singapore, Port Moresby (!), Jesselton, Kandy, Port Dickson or Taiping.

"Give me Taiping, with the *angsena* trees in bloom," quoth old Froude, "if this is Bombay. . . . Rotten hole, I call it. . . . I'd back Taiping against Bombay any day in the week and any hour in the day, and from any point of view. . . . I like it, begad. . . . It's God's own spot, Maykins, and I'll go back to the Perak Club to die, yet. . . . When I've seen you win the Championship, that is. . . . I'd back it against any spot on the face of the earth. Why, the very name means 'Everlasting Peace.' And so it is. The Garden of Eden before Eve mucked it up. . . ."

And when the procession of gharries rolled along the Hornby Road, past shops that would have been a credit to London or Paris, he said it was just Brighton-with-a-dam-bad-climate, begad.

§ 2

In the billiard-room of the Apollo Hotel, Dr. Maykings quickly showed himself a master of the game, and added fresh laurels to his wreath. To the abiding and abounding joy of old Froude, young Longleigh of Seremban had made but twenty-nine when Maykings finished a break of forty-eight that ran him out with a hundred and seventeen; Brandon of Penang's score was only thirty-six when Maykings passed his hundred; and Wilbur of Kuala Lumpur was beaten by forty-two. The old gentleman's glee and excitement knew no bounds when Bell of Labu, quite the best player after the doctor, was defeated when he had made seventy-two. "I'll back him for Champion of the World at billiards as well as at boxing," he cried, smiting Maykings violently on the back. "I'll put a thousand pounds on him at ten to one, and then . . ." And then—the Naval manœuvres commenced.

§ 3

The door of the billiard-saloon swung open, and a vast young man strode in, followed by a dozen or so of other vast young men, all clad in whitish jumpers and trousers of pronounced naval cut, black boots, and straw hats adorned with

ribbons bearing the legend H.M.S. *Terrific.* Behind them entered two men in white military tunics and trousers, black boots, and white helmets. With these two was a Eurasian youth with long and curly locks and a friendly smile for all men. He wore an alpaca jacket, white cotton trousers, a whitish collar, a pale blue satin tie, yellow boots, brown hands, black finger-nails and a pencil in his ear.

The gin-club stared as one man, so purposeful, so portentous, so ambassadorial was the bearing of this party, whose members, with one accord, eyed Dr. Maykings with deep and accusing interest, while the vastest of them all approached him.

"'Alt! . . . Off caps!" shouted this man, apparently addressing himself as he halted abruptly, immediately in front of the astonished Dr. Maykings where he stood leaning on his cue, burly and solid, in his shirt-sleeves, the butt of a cigar between his even bulldog teeth.

Josephus Mummery was puzzled and somewhat nonplussed. This billiard-playin' bloke was a bruiser all right, judgin' by the cut of his jib, but he appeared to be a toff! All the bloomin' party appeared to be toffs. Sort of quarter-deck crowd.

This here was not by no means a situation to be dealt with as easily as old Bill wanted to make out. Not exactly a case for *"You the Heavy-Weight Champion o' the East? Well take* THAT *then!"* and done with it. . . . Joseph began to have sensations distantly resembling those he was wont to experience when introduced to the notice of the Old Man by the Master-at-Arms, at the instance of some perishing interfering swab of a Jaunty or Ship's Corporal.

However—he was Champion Heavy-Weight of the British Navy all right, and he was here on business connected with that same. . . .

"What's up, Jack?" queried the doctor pleasantly, as the gin-club stared at the Navy and the Navy stared at the doctor.

"Joseph Mummery, A.B., No. 78698, H.M.S. *Terrific,"* replied the seaman, and his manner struck the doctor as faintly menacing.

"Yes? And what about it?" inquired the doctor.

(Oho! The pink-eyed perisher was going to pretend he'd never heard of Basher Mummery, was he? That was his

game, eh? Well, he was going to hear about him now, all right.)

"Name o' Maykins?" asked the seaman, ignoring the question. "You the Heavy-Weight Champion o' the East?—er—*Mister,*" he added politely; but his manner, to those who knew him, was now unmistakably menacing. The gin-club moved a step or two nearer, as one man, unconsciously almost, and held its peace in breathless interest.

So did the Navy.

Dr. Maykings smiled widely.

This was splendid indeed. This was real fame. These worthy fellows had evidently heard of his arrival on the *Medina* and had come to do him honour. They had come to look at him and "pay their best respex." . . . Oh, splendid! . . . Yes, when he ordered in a dozen of pale ale or something, they'd all raise their brimming glasses, look him in the face, and murmur, "Here's best respex, Sir," ere they drank. . . . He would shake the horny hand of every one of them when they "sheered off," as they'd call it,—the fine sturdy sea-dogs. . . . How they'd boast when they got back on board, of how they'd shaken hands with the Champion! Yes, how they'd boast of it for years to come. . . . Tell their children of it.

"Well, well, Jack," he smiled, "I've certainly been *described* as that." (No untruth there, anyhow.). . . .

"Ho! Have you so?" rejoined Josephus promptly, and he did *not* smile. "Well *I'm* Heavy-Weight Champion o' the British Navy, and *I'm* in the bloomin'-well East. . . . See, Mister?"

"And I'm delighted to meet you, Jack, I'm sure," beamed the doctor most affably, and he extended the right hand of friendship and fellowship and *bonhomie* and unsnobbishness, to the worthy fellow who was the spokesman of these admirers who had come to pay their respects. (It did not look like four right hands, to the doctor, although it sounds as though it did. It seemed no more than two all told. And when he concentrated on it, it was no more than one.)

"*Now you're talking,* Mister!" cried Joe, seizing the extended hand in a grip that made its owner glad it was only one indeed, as he wrung it mightily. "C'd we *meet* at once? . . . C'd we fix it for this evening? . . . I brought these ship-mets o' mine along, an' these two Pongoes—wot you'd

call Leather-Necks, Red Marines,—an' this gentleman from the *Bombay Gazette* sportin' page, to be witnesses if I had to dot you one an' let you go, or if contrairywise we settled it an' signed articles for a twenty-five round contest whiles you're here in Bombay. . . . I been *looking* for you, I have, for years. . . . What say to twenty-five rounds?"

Dr. Maykings could say nothing to twenty-five rounds. He could say nothing to anything or anybody. He tried to moisten dry lips with a drier tongue; and hoped that sunburn and the whiskies-and-sodas would prevent his looking as pale as he felt. Also that the cue upon which he leant would help to hide the fact that he was trembling with fright. Not with fright of this young man—picture of the perfect pugilist although he was—with his tremendous chest and shoulders, enormous bull-neck and throat, mighty arms and ponderous fists, his hard implacable iron face. . . . A case of *Terrific* indeed. . . . No, not with fright at the thought of personal injury, but at that of the truly ghastly situation. . . . How could he continue his voyage in the *Medina,* after this terrible exposure? . . . He must hide his wretched head in some dark hole while the ship sailed off with all his kit and baggage. . . . He would spend the rest of his life blushing with shame every time he thought of this dreadful day, and his swift fall from the pinnacle of popularity and admiring affection to the lowest depths of utter contempt and disgusted ridicule. . . . It was too cruel. . . . He had never once actually *said* . . .

Had the Devil, at that awful moment appeared and tempted him to sell his soul for the power to put up a decent fight against this appalling man, he would have called it a deal and said thank you.

What should he do? . . . What could he do?

"What about it, Mister?" continued Josephus, now quite at his ease, dealing with matters that he understood. "We can't *both* be perishin' Champions at the same weight, in the same place, at the same time, can us? . . . Stands to reason, don't it? . . . You got a right to call yourself Champion o' the East when I ain't here—an' I reckon you got a right to do such also when you have beat *me.* . . . Contrairywise, if I beat you, there's only one Champion o' the East, and I'm *It.* . . . See, Mister?"

Dr. Maykings saw.

"Our Number One, he'll judge, an' I'll agree to one of your pals here for the other judge. And there's an Officer in the garrison here at Colaba, as was Aldershot Champion and is Champion o' Western India. He'd referee. An' we c'd have a open-air ring on the Cooperage or else down the Gymmernasium if you . . ."

And by then Dr. Maykings had got his Great Idea, had pulled himself together, and was his own man again. He raised a protesting hand, shook an authoritative head, and smiled kindly.

"I have not the very slightest intentions of disputing your right to call yourself Heavy-Weight Champion of the East, my friend," he said—and in all his life he never spoke a truer word. "I am leaving the East *for good,* and am only passing through here. To-morrow I shall be gone, and then you can call yourself anything you like. . . . So far as I am concerned, you are, in fact, quite welcome to call yourself Champion of the British Navy *and* of the East too at this very minute. I've quite finished with the title."

He had—and hoped he'd never hear it again.

Joseph looked puzzled. His followers looked hurt and sore disappointed. The young Eurasian gentleman scribbled for dear life in a reporter's notebook and the gin-club murmured its polite regrets that time, tide, and the *Medina* wait for no man.

"I'd sooner have met ye fair an' square, Mister," grumbled Joseph. . . . "I've been *looking* for you for Gordnosowlong. *You* calling yourself Champion o' the East when the *Terrific* an' me is *in* the East. . . ."

"You don't mean to say you have been calling yourself anything more than Champion of the Navy, do you?" asked the resilient doctor, with an air of offended incredulity.

Anything *more* than Champion of the Navy! Josephus Mummery gasped. A dull flush spread over his rather sallow face and his great fists clenched. "Here—we've got to have this meeting, Mister," he growled. "You said you was pleased to meet me. We'll have it to-night."

Again the doctor shook his head, but this time, instead of kindly, his expression was contemptuous. He did not seem to think any better of this fellow for going about pretending to be anything more than he was—mere Champion of the British Navy.

"Can't be done, my man," he said shortly, *"but"*—and here he laid a heavy hand upon the seaman's shoulder and frowned into his eyes with a menacing stare—*"we may meet in England. . . ."* (Of course they might, any day, any where. No untruth in that. . . . It would not be the doctor's fault, however, if they did.)

But somehow, everybody in that silent room, each man of that intent, eager, deeply engrossed little crowd, seemed to read dark deep meaning into the doctor's platitudinous remark—even as he had intended.

"'Ear, 'ear," cried William Bossom, principal second of Josephus Mummery. "Free cheers for the World's Champion, an' may the best man win—an' 'im be in the Navy."

And even as Joseph turned upon his second and bade him shut his perishing tripe-trap, old Froude cried, "There! What did I tell you fellows! He *is* going home to contest the English Championship! . . . Begad, I'd give a hundred pounds now, to see him put them on with this chap and show him something. I lay ten to one he's got more science if he isn't as lumpy . . ." and in his turn was bidden by his principal to hold his peace.

Years of discipline had taught Joe Mummery to accept the inevitable. Even as the doctor's hand rested on that iron shoulder, and the owner of the hand shuddered as he felt the size and hardness of those knotted muscles, Joe's very cold grey eyes fell and his steel-trap mouth relaxed.

"Oh, that's it, is it, Mister," he said. "I see. . . . Yes, we shall meet again all right, if that's what you're after." His granite face then cracked and crumbled into a grin.

"'Spose it wouldn' do to have a friendly spar, this afternoon or this evening, would it? There'd be time if you aren't sailing till to-night."

The doctor considered this. Gazing abstractedly at his hands, he opened and closed them a few times as though testing their suppleness. He examined his knuckles. . . .

No one moved nor spoke, and a tense breathless silence prevailed for some seconds.

"N-n-no . . . I don't think, on the whole, that I'll spar with you *now,* perhaps—as we may meet in England," he said thoughtfully, as he looked up and eyed the sailor over, appraisingly. "No, better not."

There was an audible sigh of disappointment from the naval, military and civil members of the audience.

"Don't blame him, either, begad!" announced old Froude. "It'd be dam-silly of him. He's not going to give away his form and style and ring-craft beforehand—to the very man he may have to fight for the World's Championship! Hardly such a fool as that, is he—a man that knows as much as *he* does about the game? Stands to reason."

Joseph Mummery grunted. These were subtleties and refinements beyond his ken and interest. "An' meantime you don't call yoreself no Champion of no East then?" he asked.

The doctor was frankly bored.

"My dear chap," he replied wearily, "I don't want to call myself anything at all, at present. I've told you once that I'm leaving the East for good, to-night. The matter doesn't interest me. . . . And now what about a spot of beer for everybody?"

"Free loud cheers," promptly cried one of the Red Marines on grasping the idea embodied in the last suggestion—and with a fine exemplification of the ability of any member of his famous Corps to act swiftly in emergency, raised his voice yet higher in a shout of *"Boy! Boy! Pongelo lao. Julde!"* seizing the psychological moment and striking while the day was hot.

§ 4

After the departure of Josephus Mummery and his supporters, Dr. Maykings did not think he would play billiards any more—got a touch of malaria. . . . Or sun perhaps. . . . Certainly his hand shook a little.

§ 5

"That there letter to my dear Mary 'Awkins got to be posted or torn up, Joe?" inquired William Bossom, "seein' that that bloke have *not* took your young life."

"Posted, Fat-head," replied Joseph. "Cast it adrift in a pillar-box."

" 'Tain't got no ordress nor nothink," objected William.

"Then come along to the Dorgs' Home and write an envellup," directed his friend, "and then I'm right for another year."

They made their way to the Seaman's Rest, discussing the events of the day.

"Now take it down careful and get the bloke's rating right," requested Joseph, as William again squared his arms at the writing-table.

"He's what they call a Baronite, he is—a Sir. . . . Miss Mary Hawkins. . . . No, not *Yorkins*. . . . I said . . . *co Sir Robert Blame*. . . . No they don't *go co*—it's a manner of writin' in good society, like. . . . She's his cook, an' she's going to be mine too, some day . . . *co Sir Robert Blame*—go on—write it. . . . What—spell it for you? . . . Are you writing this or am I? Spell it yerself, Fat-head . . . *co Sir Robert Blame, Yelver Castle, Yelverbury, Kent*. . . . Rotten writing too, I call it. Wherever were you educated, William Bossom?"

PART II

CHAPTER I

JOHN was not only the first butler Mrs. Hoalne had ever had, he was also her very first man-servant.

And Mrs. Hoalne feared John accordingly, and hated him because she feared him. But she simply *loved* having him, tremendously, and quite realised that she had been awfully lucky to get him at all.

Nothing but the fact that he was going deaf, dumb, blind, and silly, would have brought such a prize within her reach, for John had been in Good Houses all his life, and had served the Best People.

Had he been able to bring himself to wear spectacles, he might have continued to serve the Best People in Good Houses, but his soul revolted, and he could not do it. He knew what was fitting, no man better, and what was due to himself and the Best People. He said you might as well have a Cavalry Officer in spectacles as a Butler in spectacles—a pretty pair of spectacles indeed. You might as well have a Bishop with a waxed moustache and a monocle; a policeman with a white beard and an umbrella.

Starve he might, but demean himself and affront the traditions and amenities of the Best People in their Good Houses he would *not*.

And as he was apt to put a plate on a guest's head or to place a tea-tray gently upon nothing at all, owing to his increasing blindness, he had to leave Good Houses and the Best People—and come to Vicarages and such persons as Mrs. Hoalne.

Rosie Maykings said that John was Mrs. Hoalne's bitterest joy and most cherished curse—but then Rosie had no man-servant of her own.

John's mistress watched him as he deftly put the sugar-tongs into the cream-jug and placed a plate of bread-and-butter in the fender. She was a tall, thin, hungry-looking

woman, very self-repressed and very Good, almost too Good to be quite true.

One of these days she'd go up to him and say solemnly and clearly, in his less deaf ear:

"John! The Vicar, your master, is so absolutely certain to become a Bishop—he is so very nearly a Bishop, already, in fact—that I regard him as a Bishop-in-the-sight-of-God, even if he is not yet a Bishop in the sight of the Prime Minister," when the aggravating old thing addressed her husband as *"M'Lord, I beg pardon, Sir, I should say 'Sir,'"* as he was always doing. She believed he did it on purpose, just to rub it in that he had always been in Good Houses and served the Best People, and to show that he had served Lords before he fell upon evil days and was reduced to serving one who merely served *the* Lord.

There was a ring at the front-door bell, and Mrs. Hoalne acidly apprised John of the fact.

A minute later, the wife and sister of Dr. Maykings were superbly announced by John, as the Misses Playthings.

Mrs. Maykings, plump, pretty and brunette, and, according to Mrs. Hoalne, far too apt to find excuses for sinners, beginning with her husband, came forward smiling attractively.

"Dear Rosie," sighed Mrs. Hoalne, extending a thin hand and thinner lips. Miss Maykings, looking exactly like Dr. Maykings made up as a woman, followed, and was presented to Mrs. Hoalne as "Matty's sister of whom I have so often spoken to you, dear."

Mrs. Hoalne greeted her guests with just the exactly right degree of cordiality due from the wife of a Bishop-in-the-sight-of-God to the wife of a very popular doctor of comfortable means and University hall-mark, who was also notably *persona grata* at the castle of Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, but who was also addicted to the gratification of low tastes, such as the pursuit of pugilism and other dubious sports that Bishops ignore or contemn.

The pious lady was exceedingly clever at this nice adjustment of values and their corresponding appropriate expression in attitude; and even varied the latter with the fluctuations of Sir Otho's financial position and with Dr. Makings's increase or decrease of domestic staff.

Since she had last seen Rosie Maykings, there had been

another terrible crisis in Sir Otho's affairs, depreciating him, and with him his intimate friends, in Mrs. Hoalne's social market; while *per contra,* the doctor had set up a smart dog-cart in addition to his brougham, and had engaged a groom or under-coachman, or stable-boy perhaps, to assist old Thomas. This aged individual could thus be now alluded to as "my friend Dr. Maykings's Head Coachman,"—so, on the whole, things had about balanced themselves, and she was just as amiable and cordial to dear Rosie as she had been on the last occasion of their meeting.

"Where's little Henry?" inquired Rosie Maykings of her hostess, when comfortably installed and fortified with a cup of tea. (She was not alluding to the Bishop-to-be but to the son with whom God had miraculously blessed that holy man.)

"Up at the Castle," was the reply. "The small Otho marched in here and demanded him, so I let him go—though not over-willingly, I must admit."

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Maykings with an inward smile. "My Jackie almost lives up there, and so do Margaret and little Jules Maligni—when he is with us."

Mrs. Hoalne gave vent to what in a less conspicuously refined and near-episcopal person, would have been a sniff. . . . It was part of the Mandeville-Bellême topsy-turvydom, lunacy, and general wild impossibility, to prefer Jack and Margaret Maykings to little Henry Hoalne, son of a Bishop-to-be.

"No, not over-willingly," repeated Mrs. Hoalne, musingly. . . . "I am *so* particular where little Henry is concerned."

Rosie Maykings smiled to herself again.

"Of course, one can't be too particular—and there's going to be a smash there very soon. A complete smash, too. Final. And sooner than some people expect. Oh! very much sooner. I've been hearing things."

"Oh? . . . Has the parlourmaid come to you, then?" asked Mrs. Maykings, a trifle naughtily—or, at least, tactlessly.

"I *never* listen to servants' gossip," replied Mrs. Hoalne, and her manner was archiepiscopal in its dignity and superiority. Again Rosie Maykings smiled inwardly.

Many of Mrs. Hoalne's acquaintances did this when she was talking to them, and some did it openly.

"No, I never listen to scandal, nor talk with servants," she continued.

"When did Jane come?" asked Rosie, ignoring the remark, for, like all good women, she loved just a little gossip and a *soupçon* of scandal with her afternoon tea. Not earlier in the day than that, mark you. She would no more have countenanced scandal at breakfast than her husband would have countenanced whisky. No,—scandal between four and five for Rosie, and a whisky-and-soda for Matthias when the sun was below the yard-arm.

"She came to me on Monday," replied Mrs. Hoalne. "The poor girl came to me, without completing her month's notice—and it looks as though she can whistle for her three months' wages, not reckoning the month she hasn't finished. . . . Most truly disgraceful and abominable. . . . Incredible. . . . Poor girl, she . . ."

"I suppose she was insolent to Lady Mandeville-Bellême though, wasn't she?" put in Miss Maykings, much intrigued.

"She merely addressed her as *'Cookie,'* when she couldn't get her wages," replied Mrs. Hoalne, "which is precisely what she was, as you have doubtless heard. . . . She was kitchen-maid in this very girl's time too."

"And therefore very naturally and thoroughly enraged when reminded of it, poor soul," observed Mrs. Maykings, who had always felt very sorry for Lady Mandeville-Bellême.

"I should really have thought it would have been the very last thing that any decent-minded person would have called her, for fear of hurting her feelings."

"Feelings, indeed!" snorted her hostess. "That class of person has no feelings. . . . And the other servants are leaving, one by one, and the trades-people are beginning to look askance. . . . I know that Jones won't supply anything more to the stables until his bill is paid, and some of them are absolutely dunning the wretched Sir Otho."

"Poor soul," murmured the tender-hearted Rosie, who admired that unhappy gentleman and pitied him from the bottom of her heart. (Pity is akin to love, we are told by those who understand these matters.) She sighed heavily.

"The real trouble will come when he can't get any more old brandy," continued Mrs. Hoalne. "Duns and debts and difficulties, short commons and starving horses and departing servants, and the whole place and estate going to rack and ruin, aren't matters that concern him in the least—so long as he can just lie on the couch in his library and soak brandy,

and read his wretched books until he is too drunk to do it any longer. . . . No, the other things are her affair now."

"Poor wretch!" said Mrs. Maykings and sighed again.

"Serve her right!" snapped Mrs. Hoalne. "As Mary Hawkins, the kitchen-maid, walking out with a common sailor from Chatham, she was very well, and did very well. . . . It's not as if she had even been his house-keeper—some house-keepers are decayed gentlewomen. . . . What on earth the man did it for . . ."

Another quiet smile for Rosie, who was aware that Mrs. Hoalne had a sister, terrifically a gentlewoman and decidedly decayed, who would have been the ideal manageress of the household of the widowed Sir Otho.

"What on earth the man did it for?" again asked Mrs. Hoalne of gods and men.

"Well," said Miss Maykings, "I asked Matty that, and he said she told Sir Otho that she was thinking of leaving to better herself—by marrying some soldier or sailor or something—and was actually on the point of doing it. But as she was the only person Sir Otho had ever known who could boil fish as he liked it, he said he'd 'better' her himself if she'd only stop . . . the cook having left in despair and disgust."

Mrs. Hoalne smiled wanly.

"Yes, we know all about that, my dear Miss Maykings," she said.

Was this visitor to Yelverbury going to give *her* information about Castle affairs?

"He lives on boiled fish," she added, "since he ruined his digestion with drink."

"It seems she had just quarrelled with the sailor, though," said Mrs. Maykings, "and when Sir Otho instructed her to leave the kitchen for the drawing-room—in theory but not in practice, of course,—she respectfully 'up and married him' as she says. . . . Poor thing! I am so sorry for her. She calls herself Lady Mangled-Blame and considers those people who pronounce it Bellamy as rather indelicate."

Miss Maykings laughed.

"What a tragedy for both of them," she said.

"Yes," said her sister. "If Matty had been in England it would never have happened. . . . He was at Christ Church with Sir Otho, you know . . . but of course you do—Mr. Hoalne was 'up' at the same time, wasn't he?"

Mr. Hoalne had been an obscure and exceedingly poor and needy exhibitioner at Christ Church and had received much help and kindness from Sir Otho Mandeville-Bellême and owed his present incumbency to that gentleman.

Mrs. Hoalne resented the implication and her tone showed it.

"I really don't quite see what difference your husband's presence would have made," she said. "Henry was at College with him quite as much as Dr. Maykings was, not to mention that Henry is his Rector and Spiritual Guide—er—Chaplain to the Castle, as it were."

"Yes," mused Mrs. Maykings. A fine spiritual guide he had proved, if one were to judge by results. A distinguished scholar and a "mirror of fashion and a mould of form" ten years ago—now a drunken wreck, married to his kitchen-maid cook; a penniless bankrupt.

"How she could have done it, I don't know," continued Mrs. Hoalne. "She must have known how it would end."

"Oh, he could wheedle a bird off a twig," said Mrs. Maykings. "He probably said, *'A month's notice? Rubbish. If you want to marry, my good woman, you can marry* me—*and let me hear no more nonsense about a month's notice . . . I'll marry you instead. Remind me of it to-morrow'*—and she probably replied, *'Yes, Sir,'* very respectfully and 'obeyed the gentleman's orders as one who had been brought up to do such, and knew her place when bidden by Sir Otho Mandeville-Bellême.' That's about the truth of it. Especially if her young man had left her."

"Probably. Anyhow—mark my words—the smash will come soon, and it will be final and irremediable," and Mrs. Hoalne looked as though she'd bear up quite bravely when her dread prophecy came true.

"That poor laddie too," mused Mrs. Maykings.

"Yes . . . that poor laddie," agreed the other lady, in a somewhat kinder and gentler voice. "What earthly chance has he, with such a father, and with the example of such a father before his eyes. And with such a mother!" But she hastened to add:

"No—I don't think I shall let little Henry associate with him any more. He'll never be able to bear the title, on nothing but Sir Otho's debts and disgrace."

CHAPTER II

MEANWHILE, Life was proceeding much as usual with the poor laddie aforesaid, albeit what was much as usual in his case, would be most unusual in that of most sons of persons of quality.

He was very big and quite incredibly strong, for his age, and appeared to combine his father's beauty with his mother's sturdy build and ruddy health, strength and energy.

He, Jack Maykings, Margaret Maykings, Henry Hoalne and another boy visitor, addressed by Otho as Julia, trooped into the shabby schoolroom above the library, for tea. Jules, a very sallow, black-haired, large-eyed lad, was the guest of Dr. and Mrs. Maykings when not at his preparatory school—his father, Señor Pedro Maligni, being a very wealthy and prominent merchant of Tangier, and a friend of the worthy Doctor. Of the boy's mother, little was known and much suspected—among other things that she was an errant Moorish lady, ex-favourite of the Sultan himself.

Tea was an austere meal by reason of short commons and the shorter manner of Miss Jennifer, a lean and harassed-looking spinster who had been Otho's governess for a few months and who would cease to hold that arduous office just as soon as she could collect certain arrears of salary.

"What have you been doing since lunch, Otho?" she inquired as the children melted gently and reluctantly into range of her high-powered spectacles, and taking their seats, viewed the spread without great enthusiasm.

"Balloboli," replied Otho, and his right eyelid drooped slightly for the fraction of a second as he glanced innocently at Margaret Maykings, his most approved ally and lieutenant. Wherefrom that young lady clearly understood that the proceedings of the men-folk, that afternoon, were not to be divulged by foolish female tongue to more foolish female ear. And she would have gone to the stake rather than let it do so.

Otho had obtained the useful word from his father, who

had applied it to the interesting game of shove-ha'penny which he had once found Otho and Jack playing on his library table when he was supposed to be too drunk to take any interest in their, or anybody else's, proceedings.

The boy gathered that it was Greek from *ballo,* I throw, and *lobos,* a disc, but was not quite sure, nor at all interested. Sufficient that *balloboli* was a satisfying word and a useful. All forbidden or doubtful pastimes were referred to as *balloboli* in the presence of the Authorities, to their mystification—nor could wild horses nor wild governesses have drawn from its users any elucidation of this invaluable and impressive password. Realising this, Miss Jennifer wisely held her peace, but not for long. . . . Her cold eye fell upon the, alas, far from lily-white hands of Margaret Maykings.

"Good Gracious, Margaret!" she observed, "what have you been doing? Your hands are *black,* filthy, disgusting! . . . I never saw such disgraceful hands. Never!"

"Never?" queried Otho. "Never ever? Have a look at mine then, Miss Jennifer," and he displayed his paws with honest pride.

Compared with them, Margaret's merely "also ran."

Clay-fort making, gunpowder-handling, brass-cannon firing and cleaning, are bad for the appearance of the hands, even of the most aristocratically descended.

Miss Jennifer made such signs and tokens, looks and motions, as might be exhibited by a liverish passenger on a cross-Channel steamer in a storm. "What on earth have you been doing, Otho?" she cried. "Have you been in a chimney?"

"Balloboli," replied Otho, "it does look like soot, doesn't it? . . . I must have touched something dirty I should think, shouldn't you, Miss Jennifer? Then I must have touched Margaret's hands, and that's how it all happened."

Silence.

Miss Jennifer jumped.

Something, it appeared, had smitten her on the tip of her nose. . . . The children held their breath and stared round-eyed.

What would happen now?

She rose, white with anger.

"Who threw that at me?" she asked softly, in a terrible

dead voice, a voice that moved Henry Hoalne to nervous tears, innocent though he was.

No answer.

"Cease eating, all of you," cried Miss Jennifer. "There will be no more food touched until I know the truth."

"I mean to know the person who . . ." she continued.

"Not worth knowing, the low cad," interrupted Otho. "I should cut him. Besides," he added, "you know him already, Miss Jennifer. He's having tea with you, whoever he is."

Miss Jennifer rang the bell.

"You may remove the tea-things, Jones," she said icily, when the maid entered. "All except mine. . . ."

Jones grinned and tossed her head, but did not obey.

A woeful wail arose from the stricken band of hungry children.

Although it was admittedly a rotten tea, ungraced by cake, food is food, and the jam, a highly-coloured product of the laboratory, based upon turnip and cochineal, looked quite decent.

"Of course, something may have fallen from the ceiling or heaven or somewhere, and just happened to catch you on the nose, Miss Jennifer," suggested Margaret, who was anhungered and had hoped to put jam on buttered bread, unreproved, as she was a guest.

"It may mean good luck or something," added Jack Maykings hopefully and encouragingly. "My father found a shilling in an old boot once. He must have dropped it there."

"I pinched a pip," remarked Otho with meaning.

"What about it?" asked Miss Jennifer.

"It jumped."

"Well?"

"It may have hit you on the nose, Miss Jennifer. . . ."

Surreptitiously Margaret secreted a slice of bread and butter and wrapped it in her handkerchief. Could she put jam on another and apply it to the first without excessively evil effects?

The meal proceeded in silence, broken only by the faint groans of Otho who, forbidden to eat more until he had confessed more, tightened his belt from time to time, until he began to resemble a wasp.

Diving beneath the edge of the table, he then sought re-

freshment in the better parts of the orange that had been his undoing.

"Why did the pip squeak?" he propounded upon emerging. "Give it up? Because it heard the orange peal."

"Silence," said Miss Jennifer, and when Lady Mandeville-Bellamy, as she always called her, happened to come into the schoolroom, she laid the terrible case before her—greatly to the poor lady's discomfort and perplexed perturbation.

Upon hearing Miss Jennifer's terrible tale of how Otho had insulted and assaulted her, Lady Mandeville-Bellême's red face grew quite pale.

"My boy *assaulted* you!" she cried in horror. "He *assaulted* you!" . . . To Mary Hawkins *alias* Lady Mandeville-Bellême, the word had only one meaning, and that a terrible one. She could have fainted. "Tell me what you did, Otho," she said, turning to the boy, her lips trembling. "Tell me yourself what you did to her, dearie."

"I pinched a pip," he replied.

"Well?" replied his mother. "Speak English an' tell me jest what you have done to her." The colour was returning to her face, but she still looked frightened and anxious. Her son was well-nigh as incomprehensible to her as Sir Otho himself.

"*I* will tell you," broke in the enraged governess. "He struck me in the face."

"Never!" interrupted Lady Mandeville-Bellême. "Oh, Otho, you naughty, naughty . . ."

". . . with something that he threw," continued Miss Jennifer. "He says it was a pip. And it must have been intentional—and was most painful."

Miss Jennifer was, in the unsophisticated parlance of her charge, "lashing her tail frightfully and prancing on her hind legs. . . ."

"Excuse me, Miss Jennifer," put in Otho, "I'm awfully sorry I hurt you. I had no thought of being rude—and I threw nothing at you. I wouldn't do it."

"Then what did you do, Otho?" demanded his mother again. "Where did you pinch her? . . . Tell me, dearie."

"I pinched a slippery pip," he replied politely.

"Hold your tongue, will you!" cried his sorely tried parent, "and apologise to Miss Jennifer."

"I do, Mother. . . . I really beg your pardon, Miss Jennifer. I'm awfully sorry the pip hit you and made all this fuss about nothing."

"That's right," smiled Lady Mandeville-Bellême. "And your governess shall set you some extra lessons to learn you to behave. . . . Good-bye, children—be good. Give my love to your mothers"—this last for form's sake—and the poor lady passed on through the room, to her husband's study. He'd be needing attention at about this time.

"You shall write out *'I must not pinch pips'* two hundred times," said Miss Jennifer to the bad boy, as the door closed.

"But I don't want to," he replied.

"You'll write it nevertheless."

"I mean I don't *want* to pinch pips two hundred times," was the reply. "So why write it?"

Miss Jennifer vouchsafed no reply. . . .

As the children retired from the schoolroom, to dispose of the remainder of the half-holiday, Margaret handed Otho a damaged but practicable jam-sandwich.

"It's made my pocket all jammy, 'Tho," she said.

"Now it's going to make my stomach all jammy," replied the boy as he took it, "but I don't grumble."

Roberts, the rubicund white-haired butler, who had served the late Sir Otho, and whose father had served two Sir Othos before that one, crossed the huge flagged dining-hall as the children entered it.

"Roberts," said Otho, "never pinch pips. It's wrong and leads to trouble."

"Quite so, Master Hotho," replied the old man. "Him as'll pinch what isn't his'n, when he's pinched, he'll go to prison. . . . 'Ave 'er Leddyship gone through to Sir Hotho's study yet?"

"'Er Leddyship 'ave," replied the boy, and turning to his band of followers, pointed out that, there being five people, his imposition only amounted to forty per head and could be quickly accomplished.

Later, when the visitors had gone and the boy was in bed, Lady Mandeville-Bellême sought out Miss Jennifer and bade her be more careful of her language.

Miss Jennifer plainly hinted that she knew rather more

about the use of words than did her employer, and more than hinted that she would like her over-due salary, as she came of poor but *honest* parents—whom she supported.

Lady Mandeville-Bellême replied as she had been wont to reply to an impudent scullery-maid in the days when she was Mary Hawkins, promoted to Cook.

In the end Miss Jennifer announced her intention of leaving on the morrow.

"And I shall put the matter in the hands of my solicitor," said she—in evidence of the conclusion of a painful interview. And:

"You can put it in his hat, for all I care," responded Lady Mandeville-Bellême—in evidence of a haughty and lofty spirit.

CHAPTER III

SIR OTHO ROBERT MANDEVILLE-BELLÊME prided himself on being, among other excellent things, a man of his word and of regular habits.

"Up, Bellême! I Saye and I Doe" was the thousand-year-old motto of the House of Mandeville-Bellême, and when Sir Otho said he would refrain from drinking brandy before eleven o'clock in the morning, he kept his word. And he never drank anything else for the rest of the day. Nothing but Waterloo Brandy.

Clad in a white silk shirt with collar attached, white cord riding-breeches, silk socks, Oriental slippers of scarlet and gold, a silk dressing-gown and a languid smile, he lay upon a great couch in the vast bay-window of his panelled, oak-roofed library at Yelver Castle, and read Theocritus with such ease as a great knowledge of the Classics, a trembling hand and a congested eye permitted.

His hand would steady, his eye would clear, his brain awaken, toward mid-day and the middle of the bottle,—and all would be well with Sir Otho—for an hour or two. . . . Then would come drowsiness, mental and physical failure, coma, and an awakening, perhaps in the small hours of the morrow, to Horrors unnameable, the nature and details of which mercifully could not be fully recalled when sanity and peace were temporarily regained.

And to him, this bright morning, came his lawful wife Mary,—Lady Mandeville-Bellême,—walking delicately as Agag, lest her incomprehensible and formidable lord and master be annoyed and offended. She coughed nervously upon entering the room, as one apologising for her miserable and unworthy existence.

Sir Otho continued the pursuit of the pleasantries of Theocritus.

"I wanted to speak to you, please, Sir Otho—er—please, dear," she said, correcting herself, as usual, when she had

addressed her husband as though he had not borne that honourable and sweet relationship.

The golden silence re-settled upon the beautiful old room, and Lady Mandeville-Bellême looked through the great mullioned window without seeing one of the fairest views in all fair Kent.

"I wanted to speak to you, Sir Otho—er—to you, dear," she repeated a minute or so later.

Without looking up, Sir Otho yawned and then replied banteringly:

"Now that's very interesting, Mary Hawkins, I mean dear. . . . And for how long did this strange yearning persist. Roughly speaking, that is?"

"I wanted to speak to you, Otter," repeated his wife dully.

"I am not an otter, my excellent Mary Hawkins," replied the baronet, laying his book on the floor and passing his hand across his eyes. . . . "However! . . . You wanted to speak to me. Yes . . ." He stared abstractedly at the oaken ceiling, while his wife plucked at her skirt and pleated it in her trembling fingers.

"You wanted to speak to your loving husband, Mary of the Hawkinses," he encouraged her.

"Yes, Hotho . . ." replied the poor lady. "I wanted to say something to you."

"I grasp the fact, Mary. As they sometimes say, transpontinely, in the occident, 'I get you,' but it would seem to be a fact of the merest academic interest and really scarcely worth recording—since you *wanted* to speak to me and the desire has passed *into* the past as it were. . . . Still, I am broad-minded, and of interest am I wide. . . . So thanks for mentioning the matter, Bonnie Mary, for any little phenomenon may well attract the philosopher and student of life. . . . Quite, quite. . . . *Nihil humanum alienum puto,* as you were about to say . . . Sir Isaac Newton saw an apple fall . . . Mary Hawkins wanted to speak . . . Both simple facts, but interesting, interesting. Nay, portentous almost . . . And equally attractive food for mental mastication, my dear Mary. . . . And now get to Hell out of this. . . . Close the door gently as you go out, beloved . . ." and Sir Otho appeared to sleep.

"I wanted to speak to you, Sir," persisted Lady Mandeville-Bellême, her comely and kindly fat face flushed with dis-

comfort and a rising sense of injustice and helplessness.

Her husband opened his eyes and regarded the ceiling patiently. He sighed.

"The most valuable and interesting statement in the world is apt to lose something by 'vain repetition as the heathen do,' dear lady," he gently whispered. "I grasp and realize and appreciate the fact. I make a mental note of it—for what it is worth—*'Mary Hawkins, at some time unspecified, but past, wanted to speak to her husband.'* For how long this neither wholly unnatural nor unintelligible yearning did persist, there is, so far, no evidence. . . ."

"I am not a heathen, Otho . . ." began Mary.

"I rejoice to hear it, my darling," observed Sir Otho. "I hope you'll never join that bigoted sect. . . . A pagan now is much nicer, wholly different . . . a joyous child of the honey-golden sands by the wine-dark sea and the Pan-haunted wood around the nymph-loved pool. . . . Whereas a heathen is a—oh, a modern sort of creature who merely evades missionaries unless he happens to be stalking one for the pot. . . . No, don't ever be a heathen and do *that,* my sweet girl."

"No, Sir," promised Mary, and added, "I wanted to speak to you, Hotter."

"Not 'hotter,' dearest—more warmly, say . . . Yes, *'I wanted to speak to you more warmly, my own husband,'* sounds more delightful, I think. More warmly—or perhaps you meant more eloquently and with more fire, rather than more amorously? . . . *'I wanted to speak to my otter with the tongues of men and angels,'* rather than *'to approach him with Sappho lips of fire,' eh, my child? . . .*"

"I want to speak to you, Sir," maintained the sturdy daughter of the sons of toil.

"But you *are* speaking to me, you wayward humorist!" explained her lord, closing his eyes wearily. "Do be reasonable, even though a woman,—and a most charming one. . . . What would you think of me, now, if in the very middle of a cigar, I were suddenly to announce, *'I want to smoke,'* and kept on saying it? . . . There you stand and chatter like an extraordinarily, inexcusably, inebriated magpie, for hour after hour, and then suddenly observe that you want to *speak!* Do go to the Devil, my dear Mary. . . . Serve the beggar right. . . ."

"The Stores at Tonbury have returned the last order," replied her ladyship, as he paused for breath or for effect,—seizing her opportunity and maintaining it by a swift monotonous outpouring of her troubles, "and say they can't supply any more groceries nor anything till they've had a bit on account. And there isn't hardly any flour nor tea, coffee, sugar, currants, raisins, spice, salt, vinegar, pepper, mustard. . . ."

"All things I abhor, my child," murmured Sir Otho as in a dream.

". . . nor any sauces, salad oil nor candles nor paraffin in the whole house," continued Mary.

"And the butcher told Jane he hadn't come to bring joints but to bring his bill and get his money, and the saucy toad had the face to say he wanted to see *you*."

"Send him a photograph," murmured Sir Otho. "A very creditable longing."

". . . and before long the baker will be the same. . . . And they've got their living to get the same as other folks. . . . And that Miss Jennifer is going to leave to-day and put it in the hands of her solicitor. I told her she could put it in his hat if she liked, nasty patteronisin' toad. And the wine-merchant says he won't . . ."

Sir Otho opened his eyes and sat up with remarkable agility at the mention of this important minister to his personal needs, and looked at his wife for the first time since she had entered the room.

He gave a heart-rending groan and clapped his hands to his eyes.

His wife sprang to his side, consternation and solicitude written upon her comely face.

"What *is* it, dear?" she cried.

"Oh, God!" groaned the stricken man. "Oh, merciful Heaven! The screaming scintillating coruscation of shouting horror! The blinding uproar of shrieking dissonance of colour! . . . Oh! . . . A pink blouse, a brown skirt, a mauve house-jacket, purple stockings, brown shoes. . . . Brandy! . . . Help! . . . Quick!"

Sir Otho looked at his watch as his wife dashed off for the decanter and syphon.

When she bore them to his side, her husband was himself again and would not allow mental shock and its consequent

suffering to serve as excuse for an infringement of his rule.

He was a man of his word and of regular habits.

No alcohol before eleven o'clock, and it was only ten fifty-five.

"I Saye and I Doe."

He would wait, with his eyes tightly closed and covered —unless, of course, his wife chose to leave him and enable him to open them without suffering.

His wife left him, and, with the assistance of old Roberts, who understood these matters, and who wrote a clerkly hand, made preparation for withdrawing a hundred pounds of her savings from the Post Office Savings Bank. Unpaid servants, clamorous trades-people, hungry horses and a thirsty husband were banishing her sleep—and a hundred pounds, judiciously distributed, would go far and do much.

As she allocated it, to the last penny, she thought of that dear Joe Mummery with whom she had walked out so long ago, that Joe whom she had loved so well, and with whom she had quarrelled, to her undoing. . . . She would probably have been married to him for years by now,—so happily and peacefully married,—but for that stupid nagging of hers about his Godless prize-fighting habits, so nasty and low.

Alas, for his too-late repentance, his vain too-tardy reformation.

At least, he himself *said,* or rather wrote, that he was repentant and reformed—when the harm was done, and she was unhappy miserable Lady Mangled-Blame! But there, men are all alike, take them how you will, and least said, soonest mended. And it's no good crying over spilt milk—or spent savings.

CHAPTER IV

THE following afternoon "the postern gate," as the children called a very ordinary door in the kitchen-garden wall, was stealthily opened to admit one who came and knocked a mysterious signal-knock. The opener opening had seen the comer coming.

There was no reason for stealth or mystery, save that these are excellent sauces to the appetite for games and make-believe.

"Hist! And give the password," quoth Otho.

"'*Balloboli,*' my lord," replied Margaret Makings, and the conversation fell to lower levels.

"Khartoum ready for the siege?" inquired Margaret, and being assured that it was, and all the cannon loaded, proposed that dear Punch should accompany them to Big Attic, as he simply loved it.

Dear Punch was a big white rat who dwelt in strictly celibate solitude in a disused stable, his lodging being a small box which reeked right redolent of rat.

Being enlarged and bidden "come to his mother's arms, the darling pet then," Punch obeyed with alacrity, and climbed to the girl's shoulder.

Making their devious way to Big Attic, the children met Lady Mandeville-Bellême, who kissed Margaret fondly. Luckily, Punch had "gone inside," and was somewhere beneath the young lady's frock.

"Don't get into any mischief, darlings," she said, on learning that their destination was Big Attic, "for I'm not coming to the horrid place no more. Otho saw a great rat there. I should have died, if it had been me."

"Did you, 'Tho?" inquired Margaret.

"Rather!" was the reply, "and the beggar stood and stared at me as if he knew me. No more afraid than if he'd been a tiger."

"Horrible!" shuddered Lady Mandeville-Bellême, as she departed. "I wonder how you can go there."

Arrived at Big Attic, Margaret set Punch free to roam.

"Fancy your seeing a great rat here, 'Tho," she remarked. "Are you sure you did?"

"Quite," replied the boy, and added a moment or two later. "It was white, and it's name was Punch."

Margaret laughed gleefully.

"She won't come up again while we're playing," said the girl, "but what a shame to tell her fibs!"

"It would be a shame," agreed the boy. "That's why I never do it. . . . What d'you think of Khartoum?"

"Golly! You have pinched the Swiss Chalet! How ripping!" squealed Margaret.

"I Saye and I Doe," quoth Otho, who had grown up in the nurture and admonition of the Bellême motto, until it was an integral part of his character.

What the boy specially liked about Margaret Makings was her staunchness and utter freedom from sloppiness. More like a boy . . . practical . . . sensible . . . blunt . . . in fact quite a little hard and tough, for a girl. Yes—excellent chap, young Margaret.

Although her brother Jack was a good egg and a fine boxer (for he had regular lessons from a professional, under his father's eye), he somehow was not quite as *sound* as Margaret.

No one but she and himself knew the wondrous Valhalla, the military Paradise, they had made of Big Attic, a vast room beneath the hoary tiles of the Castle, remote and unused. It was the Peninsula, Belgium, Egypt, Africa or India, according to the needs of the moment, also a Wonderland of their own creation, tenanted by great Heroes—present in the flesh, or rather lead, for the soldiers were of that metal. Napoleon, Wellington, Ney, Soult, Blücher, Gordon, Wolseley, the Mahdi, and many another known to fame, trod those worm-eaten boards in leaden incarnation. There the children re-enacted every fine military deed of which they had heard, or read, whether two or two hundred of their troops were required in the staging of the scene. There they used cannon and gunpowder, and learned to be careful; trained hand and eye unconsciously in manufacturing paper tents, cloth or kid saddles, clay forts, wooden bridges, tunnels, mines, railways, canals, and so forth; developed imagination and inventiveness; got away from the cares and worries of this world (as heavy to children as to their parents) and were busy, earnest,

happy, thoughtful, and productive of the work of their hands and their brains.

"You've got no Nile, 'Tho," remarked Margaret. "But Khartoum's splendid."

It was. It consisted of a huge flat box, with low sides, containing a fine Swiss Chalet, a doll's-house, tents, and many flat-roofed Oriental houses, erected on the simple plan of cutting doors and windows in inverted cardboard boxes.

On the walls of Khartoum, brass cannon were mounted—nailed to heavy wooden blocks and peering through embrasures. Others, on wheels, or on wheeled wooden carriages, glowered through port-holes. One big "six-inch" gun—it was six inches long—stood high in the centre of the city, and could be swivelled in any direction.

Khartoum covered about a couple of square yards.

In a short time it became a scene of the neatest military efficiency. In a long row of cardboard stables, each in his separate stall, stood a dozen horses of impulsive appearance. Beside each horse was its saddle, a small oblong of red cloth cut by Margaret from a hunting-coat of Sir Otho's—the boy having purloined it, after having decided that Father would not want it again. The straddle-legged riders of these horses—ridiculous-looking persons when dismounted—lay in tents, sleeping.

On every salient point of the city stood a sentry, while, in the market-place, a battalion was at drill. On a small sheet of tin the boy made a camp-fire, and over it stood a tripod of long needles from which depended an inverted thimble, representing a cooking-pot.

The water-supply of the garrison was contained in a drinking-trough, which had once formed part of dear Punch's domestic furniture. He appeared to recognise it by sight or smell, and went into Khartoum to investigate the matter.

"If he stays there when the bombardment begins, he'll have a thin time," remarked Margaret.

"He can please himself," replied Otho. "*I* never asked him to join the beleaguered garrison."

From a gallows, erected on the wall, dangled, in awful warning, the body of a spy, a black savage who looked uncommonly like a Red Indian, caught in the act of supplying information to the enemy. His "stand" had broken off really, and he had sunk to being a mere "property" corpse.

On the roof of the Swiss Chalet, beside the Union Jack which waved from a hat-pin stuck in the chimney, and between two wooden-tiled, high-pitched gables, stood GORDON, the Hero of Khartoum.

The children would not have sold that leaden soldier for his weight in diamonds, so real and actual and dear a Gordon was he to them. . . . Around Khartoum, behind little mounds and bunkers of real sand, were the Mahdi's warriors, horse, foot and guns.

They were a motley lot, comprising authentic mounted Emirs, Dervishes, uniformed Egyptians, Zulus, Red Indians, Sepoys, a Camel Corps, and a considerable force of European nondescripts, probably wicked French adventurers and assorted renegades from the North. . . . Leaden palm-trees, stones, gravel, sand, dried vegetable matter, and a stock of strange shrubs from a toy farm-set of Margaret's, added reality to the desert scene.

In the centre was the Mahdi (the scoundrel!), a fine black soldier with a spear, riding a camel, to which Otho had fixed a long pin bearing a green star-and-crescent-bedecked flag.

"I know what we'll do for the Nile," said Margaret. "A lot of those square panes of glass down by the hot-houses."

An excellent idea and quickly carried out.

Before long, a river of glass flowed from the wall of the room to the walls of Khartoum; and up it, in flat-bottomed boats (or box-lids), sailed Sir Garnet Wolseley and his relieving force, which contained that popular hero, Colonel Burnaby.

Near the boats, marched the cavalry and guns under General Stewart.

Of the flotilla, the great feature was a splendid gunboat that wound up and went on wheels. Its guns were only dummies it is true, but the defect had been remedied by means of lashing a practicable brass cannon in the bows. A graver defect was its habit of bolting miles from the scene of action when fully wound-up—but you can't have everything, and it was a grand asset of the river flotilla.

Near the force was Rail-head, the terminus of a long and glorious line of railway, with junctions, stations, signals, points, tunnels, bridges and all manner of joys, that bore troop-trains drawn by clock-work engines of sturdy build

and considerable speed. This was Margaret's property—or rather, was Margaret's contribution.

On birthdays and at Christmas she asked for things that would be acceptable in Big Attic, for money seemed very "tight" nowadays in that quarter, and even gunpowder was unprocurable save when Margaret was in funds. . . .

All things being ready, the children sat awhile and gloated over the scene, as was their wont—ere commencing the work of destruction—viewing it with infinite satisfaction.

"I'm just longing to see the bullets break the windows and splinter the woodwork of that Chalet," confessed Margaret. "It *will* seem real. . . . Lovely. . . . I do hope your mother won't miss it for ever so long—and won't miss it much when she does," she added.

The gift of Joseph Mummery, it had once been the joy of the heart of Mary Hawkins, and had left her bedroom to take its place in the drawing-room when she left the kitchen to take her place as Lady Mandeville-Bellême. But when she had introduced it to the notice of Sir Otho and remarked that it wanted a glass case or cover "same as you have over wax flowers and ornaments in parlours," that incomprehensible gentleman had replied that what it really wanted was an axe, and had ordered its instant removal to the dust-bin or dung-heap—as a kind and reasonable man, he didn't care which.

The poor lady had dropped a tear upon her derided "shally," and bestowed it in a spare bedroom, a room so spare that there was no other furniture in it. Thence Otho had borrowed it to adorn Khartoum.

Having looked their fill upon the stirring and historic scene, the children tossed for sides, each hoping to be in charge of the destinies of the British forces, but sworn to do his, or her, best for the other side, if Fate were unpropitious. Margaret won the toss.

"Good egg!" quoth she and got to work forthwith.

She knew the rules, having assisted in their compilation.

She could fire any gun of the Khartoum fortifications *in situ,* take a pot with the spring-gun that fired buck-shot, and have a shot with the pea-shooter—the two last to be fired from a distance of six yards. Her opponent could then do similarly—and so alternately, or, if either leader wished, he could fire the three-inch gun at six yards' range instead.

Naturally, as the emplaced guns were known and visible, the leader of the opposition did not stand his men in line therewith, and these guns of position must not be moved when once loaded and placed, save under certain conditions. Nor could they be fired more than once. The "six-inch" gun in Khartoum was only fired in the last resort, as it was an unruly and eccentric weapon, apt to do more local harm by its recoil than distant harm with its projectile. . . . Margaret crouched over Khartoum, ran her eye along a siege-gun, loaded with Number 7 shot, struck a match, applied it firmly to the touch-hole and averted her face. Fizz! Bang! And a dozen or so of Number 7 shot embedded themselves in the wainscot of the opposite wall of Big Attic.

Margaret had missed.

Dear Punch who was sitting up and washing his face after investigating a cobwebby corner, and was thinking no evil and doing none, nearly jumped out of his skin, and then fled for dear life to his master, and ran up the leg of his trousers.

"Mind I don't sit on you, my lad," remarked Otho, who was busy.

Retiring six yards from the foe, Margaret then loaded the strong and heavy spring-gun with buck-shot, trained it on the Mahdi's largest bunker, and released the lever. A spurt of sand showed that the charge had sped true, but no foeman fell. . . . *"Damn,"* said the young lady, and "Don't curse," said her opponent, who held that to be a masculine prerogative and privilege.

"Rats to you, Otho Bellême," murmured the girl as, with the pea-shooter, she took aim at the Mahdi himself, and actually flicked his standard.

It was now Otho's turn.

"I think the Chalet would look none the worse for a few shot-holes," observed he. "Something like the pictures of the Kashmir Gate at Delhi, or the Residency at Lucknow, what? . . . I'll fire the three-inch this turn."

"Do!" besought Margaret. "It would look lovely, all 'gashed and riddled and torn with shot.' . . . Crikey! Wouldn't it look a treat if some of the cannon-balls stuck in the walls and stayed there?"

Planting the gun, loaded with Number 4, six yards from Khartoum, the boy trained it on the Chalet and fired.

Glorious! The Union Jack still waved over a firm and

erect Gordon, but the building had suffered sore. A window was shattered, a verandah was smashed, a big splinter was taken off a corner, a gaping hole yawned in a gable-roof, and a great length of garden-paling was torn away!

Splendid. . . . More—three of the defenders of Khartoum lay dead, knocked over by ricochetting balls, by splinters, or by mere shock.

"God bless our home," observed Margaret, who then elected to load the three-inch with "dust-shot," and had remarkable success. Training it on the big bunker, she touched it off, and the bunker arose in a cloud of sand and corpses, while a perfectly good gun emplaced there, went head over heels and lay on its back like a dead beetle. By the rules, it was now out of action, and the besiegers had sustained a serious loss. Moreover, the rules further entitled her to fire an emplaced gun, and to turn it to any direction and angle, provided it fired from its original station.

"Bags I a pot from the gunboat," said Margaret, and slewed the clock-work vessel round so that the bow-gun pointed directly at the Camel Corps that threatened her force marching upon the banks of the Nile.

This was terrible for the Mahdists, for the gun, a good little two-inch brass fellow, that would fire one buck-shot or several small ones, was within a yard of the camelry and had "got them sitting," broadside on.

Lying prone on the western bank of the Nile, Margaret sighted the gun, knelt up, and applied the match.

Alas! Terrible as was the havoc wrought in the ranks of the heathen, the damage to the British cause was even greater, for the tail wagged the dog, the gun upset the gunboat, and every soul on board was thrown into the river and drowned.

Worse followed. "That enables me to move a gun," said Otho.

"Don't you believe it, 'Tho, my son," denied the girl, "you didn't knock my gun out. It just happened."

"Yes—but it has happened," argued Otho, "and surely I have to gain by it, don't I? If one side loses a gun in war, the other side is that much better off—even if the ass-owners of the gun jigger it up themselves. . . . Talk sense."

"Right-o," agreed Margaret, "yes, of course."

"That's like you, Margaret," approved Otho. "Sensible and fair-minded as a man." It was one of the many traits that so endeared her to him; no wrangling, blubbering, nor "shan't play" about her. Not like the wretched Henry Hoalne. For a girl, a most uncommon good kid. Stout lass!

Then turned he a Mahdist field-gun upon the remainder of the flotilla, and found he could sweep it from end to end.

"Look out, I'm going to fire," he warned, as the gun pointed straight at his opponent's face; and as she arose and skipped the Nile, applied the match.

"Aré! Aré!" she wailed, using an ejaculation she had brought from India—for there would be no Relief of Khartoum by Sir Garnet this time, he and his boat having been blown half across the Soudan, and a lane ploughed through the occupants of the boat that followed.

The defunct General's body was reverently covered with a paper Union Jack, and left where it fell. There might be time for a military funeral in the best Sir John Moore style, if the battle finished before tea.

It did not, for, contrary to all expectation and precedent, the door opened a minute later and disclosed the ample form and red face of Lady Mandeville-Bellême.

What on earth had induced her to brave the rat-haunted terrors of Big Attic, wondered the surprised children. Was something "up"? A glance at her face showed that something undoubtedly was. Otho rose and ran to her.

"What's wrong, dear?" he asked, taking her trembling hand.

"Come to Sir Otho, quick, dearie," she moaned, "and you, Maggie, you run to your father as hard as you can go, and ask him to come at once. . . . I haven't a soul to send as quick as you'd run, and I want Otho to stay here. . . . God grant the doctor's at home. . . . He's got D.T.'s or something horrible . . ." and Margaret was up and off as soon as the poor lady had finished speaking.

"What's 'D.T.'s,' mother?" asked the boy, as they hurried along, his strong young arm round her waist, as far as it would go.

"It's a—it's an illness, dearie," panted the distressed wife, opening the door of the library where the baronet screamed and raved, wept and blasphemed, in the throes of *delirium tremens.*

§ 2

When Dr. Maykings burst into the room, Lady Mandeville-Bellême was lying on the floor in a dead faint, and Otho, his nose bleeding, his face scratched, his clothes torn, clung desperately with arms and legs and with bulldog tenacity, to the maniac who was trying to get out of the window, below which was a drop of some fifty feet to the stone flags of a terrace.

The boy's arms were locked behind the man's thighs, the man's hands locked round the boy's throat as the drunkard strove with madman's violence to tear himself free. The bruised and bleeding young face was suffused as the horrified doctor rushed forward, but the arms did not loosen nor the hampering legs untwine from round those of the would-be suicide as he bit and frothed and screamed.

CHAPTER V

THE ensuing months were the last that Otho spent beneath the ancient roof of Yelver Castle. They were full and varied, and memorable for his great fight with Jack Maykings, his curious last interview with that incomprehensible gentleman, his father; and his indignant grief and horror when the Castle was bewilderingly invaded by hordes of strange men of all kinds, from lawyers to Jew furniture-dealers.

Sir Otho had recovered from his "illness" under Dr. Maykings' devoted care and Lady Mandeville-Bellême's tireless nursing, and had seemed to be himself again for some weeks. He had even left the library and padded about the Castle,—discovering Otho, one day, in the enjoyment of a five-a-penny cigarette.

"Good morning, Sir," said Sir Otho, it being then nine o'clock in the evening.

"Good morning, Sir," replied the boy, holding the cigarette behind his back, not in fear and attempted concealment, but because it seemed "cheek" to smoke in his father's presence.

"You smoke, I see," continued Sir Otho. "Manure by the smell of it. Pray accompany me to the library, and we'll have a smoke together. I can provide you with something better than that Stinkador, I think."

What did this banter mean? A thrashing with a hunting-crop or dog-whip? The boy hoped not. Father did not look well and strong enough to do it, and he would hate to be the cause of father's working himself up into a passion and bringing on another attack of that appalling "illness." But in the library Sir Otho was all suavity, politeness and friendliness.

"Pray take a seat, Sir," he said, closing the door. "You'll find that arm-chair very comfortable, I believe."

The boy expressed his thanks and seated himself as Sir Otho went to a cabinet and produced, not a whip, but a box of cigars. With shaking hands and trembling fingers he

opened it, disclosing some big, black and venomous-looking cylinders of tobacco.

"Won't you try one of these," he said. "Burmah cheroots. I don't know if you like the Oriental tobaccos. . . . Rather stronger than an elephant. . . . I fear they may spoil your palate for cigarettes of the horse-dung variety—or any other. . . . Allow me . . ." and he struck, and presented, a match. Having selected a fine Havana from his case, Sir Otho lay down upon his couch and watched his son, who smoked on, with apparent calm enjoyment. . . . In a few minutes, the boy's head swam and he began to feel half-drunk. He would have given all he possessed, even Punch, the white rat, to have dropped the black cheroot from his feeble fingers and fled from the room.

"How do you find that cigar, Master Hawkins?" inquired Sir Otho, opening his eyes and scrutinising the boy's face.

"Fine, Sir," replied the guest, as he very carefully deposited a long white ash in the fireplace. "Excellent condition, too." He had heard Dr. Maykings use this expression with regard to these cheroots.

"That's good," observed Sir Otho, "for if you're sick in here, I'll flay you alive . . ." and he closed his eyes again.

Soon the boy felt deathly sick and the room began to revolve as he puffed steadily at the horrible thing, while exerting all his will-power to control his violent and increasing inclination to be "unwell."

"Quite comfortable, Master Hawkins?" asked Sir Otho, suddenly opening his eyes again.

"Oh, rather, Sir, thank you," replied the boy.

The man eyed the greenishly pale face of his son, lolling opposite to him in apparent ease.

"Stiff little devil," he smiled to himself, and fell asleep. At the third snore, and as the Havana fell from Sir Otho's hand to the carpet, the boy arose and fled.

As he entered his room and locked the door he murmured: "Crikey! I am going to cat. . . . *'Up, Bellême! I Saye and I Doe.'*"

He did.

It was some considerable time before he smoked again, and more than a month before he saw Sir Otho.

When he did see him, he was in his coffin, and looked better than Otho had ever seen him look.

§ 2

Before this happened, Otho had his great contest with Jack Maykings, a most formal and proper affair presided over by Dr. Maykings, Slogger Price (Champion of South Wales and Jack's boxing-instructor), and Ted Baldon, the Tonbury Terror, invited for the occasion, to referee.

It was a red-letter day for Dr. Maykings, who gave a garden-party for the great event, and invited every sporting friend he had. Among the guests it was understood that the doctor had been, in his day, one of the very finest amateur boxers in England. After lunch and champagne-cup, none was found to deny that he had been the finest amateur boxer in Europe, and the story was told and repeated, of how he had once left his ship at Bombay expressly to challenge and fight the Heavy-Weight Champion of England (then Champion of the British Navy), just for the fun of getting a bout with someone who could really stand up to him.

A perfectly-appointed ring had been staged in the garden, and the guests saw a very pretty exhibition of sparring. The fight went the scheduled fifteen rounds and was won, on points, by Jack Maykings, who was undoubtedly and admittedly a pretty boxer, but whom Otho could have knocked out, in any one of the last few rounds. He did not want to do this however, and shorten Dr. Maykings's great "show," grieve Dr. Maykings's great heart, and disappoint Jack Maykings's great hopes.

It was a source of unbounded pride and joy to the worthy doctor when his son was acclaimed victor and genuinely and generously praised by the representatives of the sporting fraternity there present. A chip of the old block. . . . A worthy son of a noble sire. . . . The boy should be steadily trained for the Public Schools Championship, his boxing half-blue at Oxford, and the Amateur Championship of England when he came to the top of his form and full strength.

The result of the long-anticipated contest quite satisfied Otho also. Naturally Jack (who boxed daily with the much-fancied stable-boy whom the doctor had engaged, as well as having his bi-weekly lessons from Slogger Price), was better than he. Naturally he would win on points—and the contest was one in boxing skill. It was right and proper that he should win. And anyhow, it would have been rotten to knock

him out in front of Margaret, Mrs. Maykings and the Doctor.

Still, it was not Otho's idea of a scrap, and he got little satisfaction from that kind of fight,—an affair which ended in both combatants sitting in their respective corners, after a given number of rounds, and waiting to hear the verdict of the referee. His notion of anything of the sort was a meeting from which only one of the twain was able to retire on his own feet, the other being, temporarily, *hors de combat.*

Margaret's attitude had amused him. Before the contest she had confessed that the thought of Jack's defeat was more than she could bear. When it was pointed out to her, by Otho, that Jack would probably win, she admitted that Otho's defeat would also be more than she could bear.

On the whole, she hoped that her brother would win because her father's heart would be broken if he did not. Having realised this, she regretted her base treachery to her pal Otho. "Life is very hard for women," she said as Otho requested her to stop her jabbering.

She watched the match from her favourite seat in the apple-tree which overlooked the ring on the lawn behind the house, and, on hearing the verdict, rejoiced that Jack had won and sorrowed that Otho had lost. It was, altogether, a somewhat mixed day, but she could afford it as she scarcely grieved once in a year.

§ 3

Then for Otho came the horrible nightmare time when his father died and was buried; his mother fought the swarm of tradespeople and other creditors that descended vulture-like upon the dismembered carcase of the Mandeville-Bellême inheritance; the remaining servants left; and, there being neither cash nor credit available, she and he were constrained to accept the invitation of her sister Aggie, and flee to the shelter of the roof of Aggie's husband, William Briggs, a gifted home-wrecking plumber of the city of Tonbury.

A new and somewhat different life began here, for Otho, in the house of Uncle Bill Briggs and Aunt Aggie, a house further adorned by their son Bert, their daughter Liz, and last, but by no means least, Grandpa Hawkins, a remarkable old gentleman, popularly supposed to have been a Pirate.

CHAPTER VI

THE months following his transplantation from Yelver Castle to the abode of the Briggs family, above and behind the plumber's shop, were months of bewildered misery and resentful heartache for Otho. He cordially disliked Mr. Briggs, who had "got religion" and had got a bad form of it very badly; he tolerated Mrs. Briggs, who meant well but jarred and irritated incessantly; he detested Miss Briggs, and both detested and despised Bert Briggs. An older son, George, had fled from home and plumbing, and was self-supporting in some highly-respectable clerical vocation connected with the cement-works or wharves.

Liz was a year or so younger than Otho, and Bert a couple of years his senior, but he soon found that they had scarcely an idea, an interest, a standard, or an attitude, in common with himself, and that they spoke a different dialect.

He had begun badly, for, within ten minutes of the arrival of the dusty cab bearing himself and his mother, and a battered and antiquated tin trunk once the pride of Mary Hawkins, cook, he had most grievously offended his relations and established in the virtuous Briggs household the reputation of being uppish, ungrateful and vicious. What else indeed was to be expected of the son of such a father?

It happened thus. The cab creaked to a stand-still at the door of the shop. Mrs. William Briggs burst forth from the doorway and fell, with tears, wails, lamentations and other signs of her joy, upon the neck of her loved and long-lost sister Mary, and then folded the blushful and indignant Otho in a moist embrace of welcome, with encouraging cries of "Quite the little man, isn't he?" and equally encouraging thumps upon the back—thumps which caused his hat to be jerked over his eyes and his worst passions to be aroused.

Mr. Briggs followed his wife's lead, as always, in social matters.

"Welcome to our poor but honest home, Mary," said he, "an' be thankful. . . . The Lord hath raised you up, an'

the Lord hath dashed you down again. Give the kebman half of wot he asks an' let him be thankful."

Behind Mr. Briggs Otho beheld an undesirable boy and an unattractive girl.

"Kiss your cousins, Bert and Liz, little man," quoth Mrs. Briggs, impelling him towards them with a final encouraging thump upon the back.

"I never kiss anybody except my mother," he replied, and walked quickly into the shop, his heart a seething cauldron of misery and anger. He loathed his inability to pay the cabman, tip him well, and to send him off contented. He loathed these over-familiar vulgar people, with their detestable pawings and kissings and unwarrantable liberties. He loathed the beastly house, street, neighbourhood and the whole town. And, quite unintentionally, he plainly showed that he did.

§ 2

Tea was a painful meal, and, as he sat and took stock of his surroundings, animate and inanimate, Otho pondered and weighed the problem as to whether his mother would be "worse off" or "better off" if he were to run away. For himself, he decided that he could not be worse off, whatever happened—a decision which he later realised as giving the measure of his youth, ignorance and folly.

As he ate his slice of bread, spread with an excellent-substitute-for-butter, of the flavour of which he felt unable to approve, he examined his host and hostess more closely.

Mr. Briggs was a large and solemn man of peculiarly grey complexion, as though the lead had entered into his soul when he found that nobody loves a plumber, or when he discovered that one can be one's own master without being master of one's fate. He appeared to be a sad man, with a sad face, a sad voice, and a sad lack of interest in the condition of his nails and general appearance. When he removed his hat before saying grace, Otho decided that, little as he liked Mr. Briggs, he liked him better with his hat than without it. While recognising his indebtedness to the man for providing a home for his mother and himself—and *how* he hoped that the debt would very soon and very fully be liquidated—Otho found himself wholly unable to like his red beard; his huge, hairy hands; his hairy neck; his faint

odour of paint, putty and stale brass; his attitude towards his sister-in-law—one of "more-rejoicing-over-the-sinner-that-repenteth," and general "I-always-expected-it" disapproving forgiveness—and particularly his attitude towards himself, Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, which was one of most unmitigated disapproval, dislike, and "we'll-see-what-can-be-done-with-*you*-my-lad," over which brooded the shocked spirit of resentment and injured self-esteem.

Mrs. Briggs was somewhat like his mother—kindly, vague, exuberant, woolly-witted, and, with regard to himself, apprehensive, forgiving, and hopeful for the best—intolerably hopeful for the best. She was ruddy and cheerful of countenance, amorphous of shape, and a little untidy. For the proper observation of etiquette, the conventions, and good form and manners, she was a great stickler, and would allow no one to attack the kippers, which she had provided to mark and grace the occasion, until provided with a "serviette," unwonted and ceremonial.

Otho noted that Mr. Briggs's kipper marked more than the occasion ere all was done.

"And what shall we call you, little man?" his aunt asked brightly of Otho, and, before he had recovered from his astonishment, wrath, and humiliation at the indignity of such address, answered her own question with, "'Bob,' I think. Otho don't seem suitable somehow. . . . Not now. . . ."

"Bob wot?" inquired Mr. Briggs, adding, "He can't be Bob Mangled-Blame here. Too high-fallutin' an' silly. We're plain folk here."

They were, decidedly, thought Otho, looking from face to face.

"He'd better be Bob Blame or Bob Briggs," opined Mrs. Briggs.

"He isn't any Briggs," objected her lord, studying Otho's face dispassionately.

"No, William," agreed Lady Mandeville-Bellême, "I reckon he'd better be Blame now, and me Mrs. Blame. I'm not going to be Lady nobody, any more, and a good job too. . . . Fairly sick of it I was."

"Why not you be Mrs. Hawkins an' him Bob Blame," suggested the plumber. "For a Hawkins you are, my gel, and a right to it."

"Funny—mother and son not being the same name though,

William," said her ladyship, and after a meandering wrangle between the adult members of the party, it appeared to be settled and accepted that Lady Mandeville-Bellême and Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême should forthwith become, and be known and addressed as, Mrs. Blame and Bob Blame, respectively.

In a corner of the room, beside the fireplace, sat Grandpa Hawkins, that aged indomitable man, and said nothing whatever. It was always desirable that he should say nothing, for what he did say was out of place in a pious house. Fortunately he was so deaf that he could not join in general conversation, and to nothing less than a loud roar, uttered in his very ear, did he respond.

"Captain" Hawkins, grandfather of Lady Mandeville-Bellême and Mrs. Briggs, was a relic of ruder days. He was over ninety years of age, and appeared to hold Death himself at bay, as he had, in the dim past ages, held preventive men, police-officers, the soldiery and port authorities of foreign countries, Chinese and Malay pirates, South Sea cannibals, and divers other foes, at bay.

Otho eyed him askance, taking stock of his ancient thick pilot jacket, collarless black-and-red-checked shirt, sea-suggesting trousers and bulbous much-burst shoes. Between the shoes and the trousers, the ends of three pairs of woollen pants protruded, but of socks there was no evidence. From a bush of snow-white hair, a mingling of eyebrows, beard, whiskers, and head-thatch, burned a pair of brilliant eyes of a frosty blue, the only living things in a dead face, but living intensely as if to compensate.

The boy gained an impression of great force and rugged virile power, keen shrewdness, controlled and patient strength, as well as of complete independence and utter indifference to public and private opinion.

So this very "rude forefather" was his great-grandfather —one of his ancestors!

By the end of the meal, Otho began to wonder as to how many more of such functions he would be able to endure in that crowded stuffy room, with its low ceiling, hideous walls disfigured with even more hideous pictures, its ugly carpet, its incredible "ornaments" and furniture.

But man is an extraordinarily adaptable animal, particularly in youth.

§ 3

But things improved when Otho had the bright idea of trying for the advertised Tonbury Grammar School Open Scholarship, for which he was eligible.

Otho worked, and in work forgot misery, regrets and grief.

Far into the night he worked by candle-light, in his attic bedroom, undisturbed by the adenoidal snoring of Bert, who slept the blameless sleep of the just and weary.

And things further improved at home after he had found a strange, amusing ally—in none other than Great-Grandpapa Hawkins, the Old Pirate, who shamelessly shamed that pious home.

To Otho, one Sunday morning, had this unvenerable ruin spoken, there being no one else in the "parlour"—in the corner of which the Old Pirate sat, day in, day out, silent, observant, inscrutable.

"Come here, boy," said the Ancient. "I want to talk to you, I do."

Smiling, Otho planted himself in front of the old gentleman, who seized his arm in a still-powerful grip, and peered into his face.

"My Mary's boy," he said fondly. *"Mary's* boy anyhow, and no gainsaying it. . . . I hate that blasted Briggs. . . . You ever see his tobacco or cigarettes lying about you bring it to yer Great-Grandfather, Cap'n Hawkins of the brig *Saucy Sally,* known from the French Frigate Islands to the Kermadecs. . . . Sailed with Bully Hayes, the Terror o' the South Seas. . . . Fought old Pease, the biggest tough in the Islands. . . . Knew Colonel Steinberger, a damn sight bigger tough. . . . Seen the last o' the sandal-wood trade an' the first o' the copra. . . . You'd bring the Old Pirate any baccy you picked up, wouldn't ye, boy? . . . Can't get about much meself.

"Why once I saw Bully Hayes make a live and livin' figure-head for his schooner. . . . A trader he was, and he'd done Bully Hayes dirt. . . . And what did Hayes do? . . . Lashed him spread-eagled under the bowsprit for a figger-head. . . .

" 'There. You blasted son of a gun and a sea-cook!' says Hayes, *'You perishin' figger o' fun—for a figger-head you are, an' perishin' you are, and I got the fun!'* and he keeps him there till there weren't much of him left, what with

sharks and one thing and another. . . . So you'd pinch the old man a bit o' bacca, boy, eh? . . . Me that's carried royals in all weathers, gale or none, all me life, an' always will. . . . I fair hate that lousy land-lubber of a Bill Briggs with his sky-pilot mug, an' his Sunday square-mainsail coat and top-gallant hat—the blasted lawyering land-shark. . . . What he wants is a three-year voyage in a hell-ship wind-jammer with a New England cap'n, a manhandling bucko American mate, and a fo'c'sle-full o' shanghaied toughs off the 'Frisco water-front. . . . Do him a *lot* o' good. . . . Sets there at that very table eyein' me as though I was dirt, or a blasted blind beggar—me that's sailed me own ship an' fought her too, till she was as slippery as the cobbled floor of a slaughter-house.

"Why I was black-birdin' in the Solomons, pearl-poachin', seal-poachin', and blasted well piratin', twenty years afore he was wearin' socks—if the skilly-faced swab ever *did* wear 'em. . . . Cut out a Dutch destroyer one night, we did. . . . Half the crew ashore an' the rest drunk. . . . Fought a Jap gunboat in the fog once and lost her, by the goodness and grace o' God, an' us full to the hatches with poached seal-skins. . . .

"Caught in a lagoon by a Dago patrol-boat once we were, an' she caught a tartar too, for as she lays us alongside we up and board her, old style, with cutlass and boarding-pike, axe an' pistol an' gun, an' fought to a standstill.

"An' once I was the only man left alive on the brig, an' me skewered to the mast with a barbed and jagged fish-spear. . . . Wicked lot o' cannibals they were, those days, in the Solomons. . . . An' we taught them to behave when we got amongst 'em. . . . Ever hear about Bully Hayes an' the Bishop? . . . I wasn't in that, mind, boy. . . . I was against it from the first. . . . No luck ever followed that sort o' game. . . . I said as much to Bully Hayes.

"'*No,*' I said. '*Not for John Hawkins,*' I said. '*I draw the line at Blasphemy an' playin' Bishops, an' preachin' in a trade night-shirt to convert kanakas an' then rushin' 'em in the middle o' the sermon. That isn't black-birdin'. . . . An' what'll they do to the real Bishop when he rolls up?*' I said.

"'*Bash 'is silly 'ead in an' eat 'im,*" says Bully Hayes, '*an' if you're turnin' a lily-livered longshore cats'-tripes, you*

can get to Hell outa this,' he says, *'you floatin' dog's-body,'* he said.

"An' I up an' answered him:

"'It's you that's going to Hell outa this, an' by way o' the scaffold in Sydney Jail,' I said, but what I *meant* to say was, can you find yer old Great-Grandfather a few cigarettes that he can mix up an' smoke in his old clay pipe, boy?"

Approaching his lips to the ear of the Ancient Mariner, Otho shouted:

"No. . . . No. . . . No. . . . But I'll buy you some tobacco with the first money I get."

"What say?" piped the Ancient, putting a hand behind the ear addressed. "Speak up, boy. . . . You don' want to mumble like a blasted sky-pilot gabblin' the burial-service at sea."

Bert and Liz had entered the room, clothed, swept and garnished for Chapel.

Otho repeated his words in a yet louder bawl.

The old man shook his head hopelessly.

"Get a bit o' paper an' write it down," he said. "But do it in print, not hand-writin', such bein' various an' difficult."

Otho retired upstairs to the wash-stand desk whereat he worked, and humoured his ancient relative, printing the words large and clear.

When he returned, the old man was again alone.

He read the message, nodded, folded it carefully, and bestowed it in a pocket of his mole-skin waistcoat.

"Looky here, Son," he whispered, "you come up to my cabin to-night when they're all gone hymn-howling to their bloomin' Chapel. See? You come an' shove a piece o' paper under the door to show you're there, an' we'll have a yarn. . . . You an' me. . . . See?"

Otho nodded, patted the old man's shoulder and went back to his bedroom to work.

This was interesting indeed, for no one was allowed to enter the Old Pirate's room on any account whatsoever, save only on the weekly occasion of its cleaning. During this process, it was the old gentleman's habit to superintend operations and to watch with jealous eyes that nothing was touched, save in the way of kindness and legitimate cleansing. When leaving the room, he invariably locked the door and pocketed the key.

It was his practice always to make his own bed—which he

termed "straightening his bunk," and to "do" for himself. He had indeed threatened with clear meaning, if obscure parlance, to "do for" anybody who didn't leave him to "do" for himself.

§ 4

At seven that evening, Otho laid down his pen, yawned, and stretched himself. He glanced round the frowsy attic, almost filled by the two truckle-beds in which he and Bert slept.

"Yah!" he remarked, and fell into a reverie. . . . Yelver Castle. . . . His father. . . . *"I Saye and I Doe."* . . . Margaret Maykings, his ripping little pal. . . . A scholarship to the Grammar School. . . . What a pity dear old Mother would persist in begging him to come to Chapel—even after he had explained that it would not only do his soul no good, but do it harm, for he loathed the service, the people, the place, and the pastor. . . . No, he would never set foot in that Chapel again—come what might. . . . He didn't want to hate God. . . . But of course it wasn't God, the God of Love, they worshipped there. . . . Poor darling Mother, it was the only thing in which he thwarted or disobeyed her, but *no,* he would *not.*

Time to go and pay the promised call on the Old Pirate. . . . Weird old bird. . . . His own great-grandfather! . . . Been a bad man, no doubt, but a bold one, and he had his own standards of right and wrong and stuck to them. . . . One could safely bet that he had never done a cowardly deed, nor one that he knew to be foul and mean.

The boy rose, took a piece of paper, and went to the door of the Old Pirate's "cabin." In answer to the signal that he was without, the door was unlocked, and re-locked after he had entered.

So this was the Pirate's Cabin!

An interesting room, garnished with strange weapons, shells, idols, and the usual "junk" of the South Seas sailor. A big iron-bound box, a seaman's chest, occupied one corner, an intriguing old box, heavily padlocked—the kind of box that set one thinking of seventeenth-century maps of treasure-islands, silver-mounted pistols, ancient charts, old brass telescopes, Spanish doubloons, pieces-of-eight, and mingled odours of sandal-wood and tarry twine.

"Sit on the box, Son," said the Old Pirate.

"So you'll buy the old man a twist o' bacca with the first money you get, will you? . . . An' when might that be likely to be, eh?"

"I don't know," bawled Otho, and again, "I don't know, I say. . . . But I'll do it . . . I'll do it, I say."

"You've got no call to shout, Son. Not when we're alone," replied the aged one. "I can hear as well as you can. . . ."

And so indeed it proved.

CHAPTER VII

THE Tonbury Grand Imperial Theatre of Varieties was, as usual, full, and business at the Bar in the Lounge, was, as usual, brisk.

A party of four somewhat flashily-dressed and ill-spoken men, occupying the middle seats of the third row of the Orchestra Stalls, were giving their best attention to increasing its briskness. They looked like what are, for some reason, termed "sporting-men." In point of fact one was the proprietor of the Tonbury livery-stables, two were partner bookmakers, and the fourth was a publican and pugilist who termed himself The Tonbury Terror and requested his friends to do the same when alluding to him. As he was friendly with the "sporting" editor of the *Tonbury Argus and Sentinel with which is Incorporated the Tonbury Daily Wire and Clarion,* he was often alluded to in print as "our famous fellow-townsman, well-known to all our readers as Ted Baldon, the Tonbury Terror, under which cognomen he met Slogger Price and Cardiff Charlie at the National Sporting Club and was, as all know, for a time Champion of England until defeated by Phil West from whom the title was finally wrested by Scotty Brown, himself defeated a few years later by Joe Mummery, Heavy-weight Champion of the British Navy."

Apparently this gentleman was the leading spirit of the quartette, the blade of highest mettle, as the others deferred to his opinion, laughed heartily at his jokes, hastily passed him the matches, or bade him come forth to the Lounge and "have another."

So frequently did the four accept each other's suggestion, as to having another, that they became something of a nuisance in their passage to and fro along the very exiguous space between the rows of seats. Nor were they gentlemen who incommoded others with diffidence and regret, or strove to minimize annoyance and salve it with earnest apology.

A large man, with close-cropped hair, dressed in dark blue,

sat next to the Tonbury Terror. Upon the fourth return of that redoubtable person from his excursions to the Bar where he drank both beer and whiskey, the large short-haired man remarked patiently:

"You stood on me left foot once, you stood on me hat once, and you stood on me right foot once. I hope you don't charge anything?"

The Tonbury Terror stared coldly, but vouchsafed no reply. Evidently the bloke didn't know Ted Baldon.

"Git up an' make a speech, why don't yer?" suggested the gentleman sitting on the right of Mr. Baldon. He was the senior partner in the firm of Pink Bros., Bookmakers and Turf Commission Agents.

The short-haired man sighed wearily. On his left sat a young gentleman and his young lady. The young gentleman looked anæmic. He wore a black coat, carried a bowler hat and dirty lavender gloves, displayed a large pearl in a light blue neck-tie, had patent-leather boots, a rolled-gold watch-chain, cuff-links that had made a black mark at the button-holes of his cuffs, a signet-ring with a pink stone innocent of crest, and very carefully pressed trousers of "striped trousering."

His hair was longish and curled nicely. The collar of his jacket gaped somewhat at the back and displayed a brazenly brass stud. . . . He had a weak, pleasant face and looked a kindly well-meaning ineffectual, from whom some employer would daily get the last ounce of brains, energy and skill for two or three pounds a week—until they ceased to be worth that amount.

His companion was a neat, modest-looking little working-girl, also dressed in her best, and displaying the same brave, pitiful standards, tastes and ambitions as her young man; the same yearnings to appear genteel and to keep up appearances, to be obviously of the middle class, not to be common, and to have everything nice—including nice light, dainty shoes, of cardboard and paper composition, rather than of leather, as worn by the vulgar; and cheap trash of clothing distantly imitating that of Society, rather than the stout and serviceable home-spun suitable to her needs.

With surreptitiously clasped hands, they sat in a dream of happiness. They were "in love," they were in their best clothes, they were in the best seats of a theatre, and seeing

Life. She to him was a goddess, an angel, perfect in temper, wisdom, sympathy and virtue. Nor did he reck that she could not boil a potato, had never done a stroke of housework, and was as fit to become a mother as to become a queen.

He to her was a god, a prince among men, perfect in heroism, ability, character and prudence. Nor did she reck that he earned just enough to keep himself in very modest comfort, had no sort or kind of skill save that of penmanship, was already at the top of his earning capacity and would never rise any higher.

So they sat in their golden wonderful dream of Love, until rudely awakened by the heavy hoof of Mr. Baldon, as it was planted firmly upon the thinly-clad little foot of the young lady. She could not suppress a scream, for long practising of the habit of wearing nice shoes with pointed patent-leather toes had deformed her feet and given her corns. The young gentleman, her swain, sprang to his feet. This was the fifth time these roughs had barged along, and this one that came first of the four and returned last was the worst. He had already dented the bowler hat and trodden on the rolled-gold head of the black-painted ebony stick.

"'Ere, I've 'ad enough o' this," he cried, his careful aspirates and accents deserting him under the influence of anger and excitement (and the swine was twice his size, too).

"Well—if you don't like the show, you can 'op out of it, can't you?" replied Mr. Baldon, and with a threatening glare passed on, and kicked the ankle of the big, short-haired man.

"I'm gettin' very tired o' you, mate," said the latter. "I reckon we'll have to part brass-rags before long."

"Dunno wot yore torkin' abaht, faice," the Tonbury Terror replied, and put his feet on the back of the seat in front of him, to the great annoyance of the stout woman who occupied it.

When he arose for another stroll Bar-wards, the clerk seeing him coming, moved his hat quickly from the carpet and put it on his head. *En passant,* Mr. Baldon gave it a couple of smart taps.

"Saounds 'oller abaht the 'ead, don't 'e?" he guffawed to Messrs. Pink, who roared with laughter.

"*I'*d box the brute's ears, if it was *me,* George," said the

young lady, as the outraged youth endeavoured to rise, furious at the insult. He was white with anger.

"Don't you do anything o' the sort," advised the short-haired man. "That bloke looks like a bruiser. If he interferes any more, I'm going to remingstrate with him meself, I am . . . Yes. I've bin listenin' to them talking. He's a bruiser, I reckon. . . . I'm a new-comer here, I am. Leastways, I haven't been here for a sight o' years. Not since I was courtin' a gel near here. . . . Lorst to me now, she is. Godblesser. . . . A bruiser, he is, all right. . . . He don' know me. . . . Oughter be ashamed of himself to behave like that,—an' him a bruiser an' all."

The clerk turned away. He did not wish to enter into conversation with a person of obviously common status, and he wished to collect his thoughts and make up his mind. He had been publicly insulted, and worse, he had been insulted before the very eyes of Gwendoline. What should he do? The man could eat him by the look of him—and this common person on his right said the man was *a bruiser* too. Where was the sense of laying himself open to the cruel humiliation and the physical pain of getting a thrashing from this brute?

Fancy a "disgraceful fracas" and a police-court summons! A nice thing for him and Gwendoline! His nose bleeding, his clothes torn, a night in a cell perhaps. . . . The least he could get would be an ignominious hiding in front of his sweetheart. He would never be able to hold up his head and look her in the face again. . . . He turned to the girl.

"Mustn't mind these cheery old sports, dear," he said. "They don't mean any harm. . . . Only their bluff rough-and-ready way. . . . Good-hearted chaps really."

The girl did not reply. One of her shoes was scratched and spoilt. Her fiancé had been made to look a fool. She was furious.

The cheery old sports were returning, Baldon leading, this time, and looking mischievous. As he reached the clerk, he placed his hand on top of that young gentleman's hat, and pressed.

"Ponk!" quoth he and smote hard, as the pressure had ceased to drive the hat downward when it reached its owner's ears.

Whereat all the manhood in George Briggs' body rose and so did George. Without hesitation he smote the astonished

Mr. Baldon well and truly on the cheek. Mr. Baldon clenched his fist; the short-haired man seized it; Mr. Pink, senior, bade his friend wait till he got outside or there'd be trouble; and his three companions pushed him into his seat amid cries of, "Sit down, there!" "Shut up, and sit down!" "Sit down!" from incensed occupants of the stalls and pit whose view of the stage was obstructed.

"*I'll* put a 'ead on that bloke, ahtside," grumbled Mr. Baldon who, like his neighbour, had been bred and born in Cockaigne. "Teach the little tyke to go abaht 'ittin' people!" and his companions agreed that such a public menace and danger as the clerk should be suppressed.

"You set about 'im, Ted," urged Mr. Pink, senior, "an' I'll cuddle 'is gel!" and the four gentlemen laughed uproariously at the jest.

Meanwhile the hapless George extricated his head, slowly and painfully from his ruined hat, and endeavoured to face the situation like a man.

To give the scoundrel in charge and get "damages" was his inclination, but the idea of appearance in the police court, in any rôle, terrified him: and Gwendoline was urgent that the ruffian should be "soundly thrashed" by her outraged, insulted and injured George. . . . And George had certainly given her to understand that he was very useful with his fists, rather the wonder of the Institute, and a devil when roused.

Anyhow, nothing could be done until the show was over and they had gone outside. . . . Unless the brute came along and insulted him again. . . . Could he get Gwendoline to come out when this turn concluded, without waiting for the end of the "house"? . . . They could come back for the second house at 8.30 if she liked. . . . Would she think he was afraid? . . . Afraid? What chance had a youth, working in ill-ventilated rooms eight hours a day, against a fellow like that? . . . Not fair. . . . What a pity he had given her the impression that he was a bit of a boxer. . . . No, Gwendoline was not going until the end of the show, thank you; and it was a very white-faced, and short-breathed, albeit stiff-lipped young gentleman who escorted her from the Palace of Varieties, closely followed by Messrs. Baldon, Pink, Pink and Hogge, and by a short-haired thick-set man in a neat dark blue suit.

Clear of the crowd, and well down a quiet side-street, Mr. Baldon knocked George Briggs' hat off. As he raised his fist to send its owner after it, his own hat was knocked off from behind. Turning, almost too astonished for wrath, he beheld the short-haired man, and transferred the blow to him instead.

It was parried with remarkable skill and swiftness.

"Now, now!" said the man. "Avast there. *You* don't want to start hittin' people! . . . An' callin' yourself a bruiser an' all. A boxin' man don't want to be a bully—he can leave that to ring-side roughs."

But the Tonbury Terror wanted blood, not admonition. *His* hat had been knocked from his head, even as he was in the act of avenging his personal honour damaged by a blow upon his cheek, administered wantonly by a miserable little three-'ap'orth o' God-'elp-me in a bowler 'at!

Retrieving his hat, he handed it to Mr. Pink, senior, and swiftly divesting himself of his overcoat and coat, handed the garments respectively to Mr. Pink, junior, and Mr. Hogge, delighted anticipants.

He then rushed viciously upon the short-haired man and drove at him with a blow that should have laid him senseless. But that quiet and respectable-looking person again parried with skill and speed, made a quick feint, and smote Mr. Baldon a blow between the eyes that sent him staggering and reeling.

A bright-faced sturdy boy who had been watching events with dancing eyes and joyously flushed cheeks, emitted a shrill hurrah, and, seeing Mr. Baldon proceed to remove his waistcoat and collar, and tie his braces round his waist, the better to "get down to it" and teach this ignorant defier of the Tonbury Terror a severe lesson, cried:

"Strip, Sir, quick! Let me hold your hat and coat. Quick! He's a pro. . . . They call him the Tonbury Terror. . . . He'll smash you I'm afraid. . . . Peel or bunk—go it!"

"Peel or bunk, is it, boy?" remarked the short-haired man, "then we'll peel and get ath'art his bows in half once," and ripped off his overcoat, coat, waistcoat and hat.

"Here, you hold my duffer and jumper," he continued, handing his clothes to the boy, "an' take care o' that gold watch an' chain. . . . You look honest. . . . An' if you see a copper coming, you holler *'Ship's Corporal sighted, Joe,'*

an' bunk for all you're worth. See? *'What? Bunk wi' the clo'es an' gold watch?'* ses you. *'Yes,'* ses I. You bunk at thirty knots, showing no lights, to the address on this en*vell*up and you hand the clobber in, an' say, *'Joe Mummery's dunnage'* an' tell 'em to take you in and give you a Stand-easy outer the Cook's galley if you're hungry, or a tanner if you aren't. See? Is it *'Can do'* and *'Carry on,'* boy?"

As the boy, puzzled and confused, gave a nod and smile, Joe Mummery turned to face Mr. Baldon and the fight began and ended.

A small crowd had collected, and Joe had no desire whatsoever to be run in. He considered that he had left "cells," Ship's Corporals and Masters-at-arms behind him when he left the Navy, and he greatly preferred to avoid all contact with their land-lubber prototypes.

Wherefore he "got down to it" forthwith, and set about Mr. Baldon in hurricane fashion, and not as he had dealt with his last opponent, the Heavy-Weight Champion of England, whom he had worn down by long and wary ring-craft, and knocked out in the ninth round.

In five seconds Mr. Baldon was bleeding from nose and lip, within ten more he had a "mouse" that would shortly become a mountain and in half a minute he was lying prone and "taking the count."

By and by he sat up and looked round.

"Serve you right, you nasty low bullyin' beast," shouted the stout woman upon whose skirt Mr. Baldon had been wiping his feet all the evening, and who had indignantly witnessed his passages with George Briggs. She had arrived in time to enjoy the brief round, and swift discomfiture of the Tonbury Terror.

A shrill cry of:

"Copper! Ship's Corporal, Joe!" rang out, and Joe dived into the crowd as a rabbit into its burrow, and fled with astounding fleetness, followed by the boy who hugged a bundle of clothing to his bosom, what time Messrs. Pink, Pink and Hogge strove to get the groggy Mr. Baldon unobtrusively away.

Being unable to keep the swiftly running Joseph Mummery in sight, the boy halted under a lamp-post, took the envelope, which had covered an effusion from William Bossom, from the breast-pocket of the coat, and read:

"Mister Jo Mummery Esq.
16 Laurle Villars
Woller Cressent
Tonbury.
Kent."

As he knew Laurel Villas, Waller Crescent, he proceeded thither in search of Number 16, and arrived a few minutes after the hasty entrance of the householder, Joseph Mummery, Esq., ex-A.B., No. 78698, Heavy-Weight Champion of England, a man who cherished, and be it said, enjoyed, a broken heart, in that the only woman he had ever loved had given herself in holy matrimony to Another—as he had recently gathered from an incoherent, wrongly directed and long-delayed letter.

§ 2

"Goo' boy!" approved Mr. Mummery, leading the way into his "parlour," and resuming his waistcoat and coat. "I didn't want to get into trouble with the police, the blarsted . . ." and here he pulled himself up sharply and coughed noisily.

"Got the watch an' chain all right too? . . . In your breast pocket? . . . Goo' boy! . . . I bought myself that gold watch an' chain with the first prize money I ever won—for to send it to my gel, an' strike me purple if she didn' go an' send it back to me. . . . Said it was blood-money or some such junk. . . . Hows'ever! . . . Here's a bob for you, my boy. Wot's your name?"

"Bob Blame," was the reply.

"That's funny," rejoined Mr. Mummery. "I uster have co-respondence with a bloke named Blame. Leastways 'e wasn't a bloke, his rating was a Baronite—you know, a Dook, Nobility an' Gentry an' such. Sir Robert Blame he was."

"Of Yelverbury?" asked the boy.

"Ah! That's right, sonny," replied the surprised sailor. "You heard of him too?"

"He was my father," said the boy.

"Yes. Go an' tell the Pongos too," replied the man, and he looked rather disappointed in the boy.

"Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême was my father," said the boy again.

The man stared and it was not a stare to be borne unflinchingly by a liar and a cheat.

"Those were the trimmings," he admitted. "She called herself Mangle-Blame, an' I never wrote the Otho part, becos the Robert was good enough plain English for me.

"Look here, me lad," he continued, "you answer me this question—an' I'll know. If you've told the truth, it's the hand of the Lord as plain as me foot, an' if you've told me a lie, you'll get out of this house quicker than you came in."

The boy looked no ordinary street lad, as he stood with an angry and haughty look mingling with a half-contemptuous smile.

"Now then! What was your mother's name before she married Sir Mangle-Blame?"

"I don't see why I should tell you my business," replied the boy. "Still—you've given me a shilling and you fight a treat. . . . Her name was Mary Hawkins."

"'Oly Jesus!" murmured the sailor, and added, "I speak it in due respect and not as a profane cuss."

He then seized the boy by the shoulders and devoured his face with keen piercing eyes.

"*I* oughter been your father, boy," said he and added a minute later, "I dunno whether I feel most like knocking your head off for Sir Mangle-Blame's sake, or huggin' you to me bosom for poor Mary's."

"Don't do either," suggested the boy.

"She was his cook," said Joseph, shaking his head in bewildered incredulity at this strange chance, and searching the boy's face for traces of likeness to his loved and long lost Mary Hawkins.

"She was always a jolly good mother," said the boy.

"Good lad," approved the sailor, and sitting down, rested his head upon his hands. . . . "I must let off steam or bust," he said. . . . "Gor strike me purple, blue and blind! Gor shiver me timbers an' blarst me broken heart! The Devil admire me and grab me leg to keel-haul me through the Brimstone Lake! . . ." and continued with strange and stranger sea oaths, to the boy's growing delight, as he thought of blue lagoons, grey parrots, white beaches, pirates, the Farrallones, kegs of rum and belts of pistols, ending at last with a long-drawn breath and, "Gawd! An' that's that!"

With his mouth silently opening and closing like that of

a gold-fish, Joe Mummery sat and gazed at Robert Blame, as the boy called himself.

From time to time he murmured, "Mary Hawkins!" or "My poor Mary!"

"I fair worshipped your mother, boy. And I do still," he groaned at last.

"Don't talk rot," replied the boy, who felt incomprehensibly irritated by this man's attitude towards his mother, the mother whom he loved, subconsciously pitied and patronised, and had always known for a being of wholly different fibre from that of his father.

"I did it, boy, none the more for that," rejoined Joe. "I broke her heart by sinful, Godless boxin', and drove her to matterimony with your father—her not bein' able to abide the thought o' prize-fightin'—havin' such a respectable mind. . . . She reckoned it Low. . . . An' yet there's a sight o' Toffs that take an interest in boxin', say what you will."

"I s'pose you'd be knowin' of the Briggses, the Plumbers?" he asked after a long meditative silence.

"Yes," said the boy. "We live with them."

"Streuth!" ejaculated Mr. Mummery. "Think o' that now! How things do work round! . . . How's the Old Pirate, old Cap'n Hawkins, Gobblessim! . . . Still alive? . . . I must *do* somethink for you, Tommy," he continued.

"My name's Robert," was the cold reply, and the voice and look gave Joe Mummery a hint of something steely and "different" as he subconsciously termed it. The boy spoke like a bloomin' Officer on the quarter-deck.

"I must *do* somethink for poor Mary's boy," he said.

"Best thing you can do now is to let me go," replied the boy. "I'm not supposed to be out after eight, and I've got study to do. . . . Thanks awfully for the shilling."

"Couldn't you stop and have a stand-easy from the cook's galley—some bangers or a pound o' steak or something?" asked Joe. "I've got so much to say to you that I can't say anything."

"No, thanks," replied the boy.

"Well—you'll come an' see Joe Mummery again, won't you, sonny? I've got such a lot to ask you about poor Mary. . . . An' I'm goin' to be a good friend to you too. I haven't got chick nor child of me own. . . . You've got to come an' see me again *soon,* mind."

"Thanks," said the boy unenthusiastically.

"How'd you like me to teach you to box?" asked Joe.

"By Jove, yes! Thanks awfully," said the boy, far from unenthusiastically, this time.

"Ah! Right you are. You've got the makings, too, me boy—plenty o' reach an' a good brisket. . . . When'll you come? To-morrow?"

"I don't know . . . I . . . You see, I have an awful lot of work to do. . . . I'm trying for a scholarship. . . . To go to the Grammar School. . . . Then I shall work for another. And Aunt Aggie's very particular about my being out."

"I'll come and have a talk to Aggie Briggs," interrupted the sailor. "Then we'll have everything above-board and ship-shape and Navy-fashion. . . . You tell her Joe Mummery's just come back to Tonbury after all these years, and that he's coming round to tea on Sunday afternoon at eight bells and expects water-creases to his tea. . . . She'll understand. . . . Thought I was going to walk out with her once, she did—an' when she got to know I liked water-creases she nearly made me a bloomin' vegetarian. . . . I was boarding with her mother—fair fed full I was on water-creases before Aggie saw it were Mary I was after—an' the old gal set Mary against me, because she said I jilted Aggie. Then I had a row with Mary just before I was going to marry her, all owin' to me being a bruiser, she says. I went to sea, an' Aggie marries old Bill Briggs to show that I weren't the only pebble on the beach, an' Mary marries her Owner, the Dook."

"I really must go, Mr. Mummery," interrupted the boy. "Good night, and thanks awfully."

Taking the boy's hand into his huge and horny paw the sailor screwed up one eye and looked most portentously secretive.

"Mum's the word about sparrin' tho', Bob," he whispered. "Avast chewin' the rag. . . . Aggie Briggs and your mother is too bloomin' respectable to have you taught to box if they knew anything about it."

"I shan't say anything," replied the boy, "but I shan't tell her any lies."

"Good boy," commended the sailor. "Facks are facks, but there's no call to chuck 'em all over the place. Speak the truth and diddle the devil, an' the Lord'll do the same for you and more also," and opened the front door.

Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême sped quickly from the abode of Joe Mummery, who called his mother "Poor Mary," to the abode of Bill Briggs and his wife Aggie, who also called his mother "Poor Mary."

He resented both the pitying attitude towards her, and the implied criticism of his father.

§ 3

Otho's announcement, at supper that night, of his meeting with an old friend of his mother and of the family, caused a sensation that surprised him.

Lady Mandeville-Bellême turned as white as a sheet.

"Joe Mummery!" she whispered.

Nor did Mrs. Briggs appear unperturbed and uninterested, as she restored her sister with brandy.

Mr. Briggs mumbled references to bad pennies, rolling stones, and dirty blackguards who fought in public for filthy lucker.

"Lucker?" queried Otho. "Oh—you mean *lucre,*" and was bidden to close his young head.

Upon having the cause of "all this bloomin' upshot" explained to him in loud roars, Great-Grandpapa Hawkins thanked his Maker, and bade Otho take note that one whose boots no Briggs was worthy to clean, nor ever would be, had come to port—and would soon come to the house too.

He was right. On the following day, Mr. Josephus Mummery called and was welcomed as a long-lost son by the Old Pirate, received diffidently by Mrs. Briggs, and coldly by Mr. Briggs whom he playfully smote in the chest—so gently that Mr. Briggs turned green in the face.

With Lady Mandeville-Bellême he was closeted for nearly two hours, and, when they emerged, her eyes were red and tearful.

CHAPTER VIII

AT the Tonbury Grammar School, life went well enough; life at home went somehow; and the years dragged by.

Otho's form-master, Josiah Braddle, a charming ageing scholar, a failure in everything except in all that matters, took a deep interest in Otho, whose father he had admired from a great distance, when the former was a Christ Church and Union blood, and he himself a thread-bare scholar of St. Edmund's Hall.

If Josiah Braddle's unstinted and ungrudging help could save the boy from his present position, saved he should be, for he had brain, back-bone, ability and ambition.

And Otho worked—as one whose salvation lay in work—and he found refuge in books.

He also worked hard in the boxing-shed of Joe Mummery, and found refuge with him also. Moreover, he here had an outlet for his constantly repressed feelings, sufferings, emotions. He found joy and self-expression, the joy of self-expression, in boxing fiercely, coolly, ferociously, warily.

He made his admired and beloved Joe personify all that he would fain fight and overcome, all that oppressed and repressed him, all that he hated and feared.

For he feared greatly that Tonbury would get him, absorb him, swallow him up, and that he would become part of his environment, a Bert, a Briggs—a plumber. . . . While admitting that a plumber may be every whit as worthy as a prince, a politician, a publican or a piano-tuner, he felt no desire to plumb, and had a preference for earning his living with brain rather than with hand. And his soul yearned for the kind of society and surroundings in which he had grown up . . . Yelver Castle . . . his tutors . . . his father's friends . . . the Maykings . . . the Hoalnes . . . the Malignis . . . Margaret Maykings.

Yes, Margaret above all—the dear little pal and perfect playmate. . . .

School wasn't too bad at all, with kindly old Braddle and a few decent fellows who did not utterly condemn and ostra-

cise him as a beastly scholarship-boy from a plumber's shop.

But home and its circle! . . . Home! . . . except for his mother, the Old Pirate and splendid Joe Mummery, who almost lived there . . . home!

And Joe Mummery, painfully and with protruding tongue, wrote to his friends, William Bossom and Slogger Price, that he was training the future Champion Heavy-Weight of the World, one Bob Blame from Yelverbury, and they might lay to that, and put their shirts on it. Strike him pink, purple and peculiar, they might. The lad was the quickest thing he had ever seen in boxing-gloves and one of the best built. And heart! He was all heart! He was going to keep him dark until he had done growing, and spring him on the Fancy suddenly, as soon as the boy had reached that point of strength, skill and experience when he'd be absolutely unbeatable. He was never to have a defeat at all, after the day he left the amateur ring and fought his first fight as a professional pugilist.

As sure as Joe Mummery's name was Joe Mummery, this lad was going to be Champion of England, Champion of Europe and then Champion of the World, and J. M. was going to hold on to the English Championship until the youngster could take it from him—for youth will be served and Joe wasn't getting any younger and he'd been and given his solemn promise to someone that he'd never box any more except to defend his title, if challenged, which was only right and natural, and had therefore given up all hope and intention of going in for the World's Championship, himself. But this boy was going to win it all right!

Slogger Price replied that he berleaved he had already seen the boy box at Yelverbury, him then being hair to a baronite name of Manful-Blame, and had been remarkable impressed because the boy could have won at any moment and just played light and lost, on points, apurpose. Yes, he'd often thought about that boy and wondered why he didn't want to win that contest. He shaped fine—but as for World's Championships, that was talking wild and counting your cockerel before it was matched, so to speak.

Unto Slogger Price, Joe Mummery answered that he must come and see the boy now, see him at work with the punching-ball, see him box, see him spar with Joe Mummery himself,

and then if Slogger Price did not firmly and fully believe he was watching the World's future Champion, Joe Mummery would hit Slogger Price on top of the nose. And Joe also invited a friend, an ex-champion, one Pug Pounder, owner of an itinerant fair-ground boxing-booth, to come and see the boy box. Pug Pounder came, and admitted that he was mightily impressed, and that he agreed with Joe as to the lad's possibilities.

§ 2

And so life went on for Otho Mandeville-Bellême, life rendered bearable by hard work, mental and physical, and the appreciative praise of Messrs. Braddle his form-master, and Mummery his trainer, in their respective spheres of action.

His progress at his studies was only exceeded by his progress at boxing, and Joe Mummery itched to "match" him, but bravely refrained.

A highly competent judge, he doubted if there were a lad in England who could beat him, such was his fire, his swiftness, his cleverness, courage, skill, cunning and unusual strength.

He fought with his brain as well as with his heart and soul and body, and he developed a style, line, and method of his own.

In Joe's vast experience of boxers, big men were slow men, strong men were stupid men, clever men were unreliable men.

This boy was obviously going to be as big as an elephant and as quick as a panther; as strong as a bull and as cunning as a fox; as clever as a terrier and as reliable as a bulldog. . . . Moreover, he was as brave as a lion and a perfect glutton for taking his gruel.

And indeed, Otho did box with his brain and was as full of strategy as of tactics. He took boxing seriously, and *thought* of boxing while he boxed. To him it seemed that a great boxer must be something of a chess-player, something of a general, something of a diplomatist. The actual hitting and guarding was but a part of the game—the splendid game that exercised and developed mind, muscle and character; the game that swiftly and surely trained one, mentally, morally and physically, provided one permitted it so to do, by playing it rightly, and with every faculty one possessed.

He had no personal ambition as a boxer, and no desire but to meet opponent after opponent, each of whom he might treat as a problem to handle, a puzzle to solve, a nut to crack, metaphorically as well as physically.

Chess for the brain, the punching-ball for the muscles, boxing for the inimitable combination of both.

So he loved boxing and he loved books and life would have been supportable but for the house, the meals, the society, the Briggs family, and separately and distinctly from the family, Uncle Bill Briggs himself, that pious plumber.

At times Otho felt that he could not, he really could not, sit down to another meal with that gentleman, and listen to his endless talk—much of which was directed at himself, whom Uncle Bill utterly detested.

One night, he pondered the idea of proceeding to London to "seek his fortune," and without any preliminary wranglings with the family. He would say good-bye to his mother of course—and to Grandpapa Hawkins and Joe Mummery. Then, failing his ability to pay the train fare, he would walk off, like Whittington, with his bundle on his shoulder and set about the job of turning again and becoming thrice Lord Mayor of London. When this happened, his mother should have a jolly good time and everything she wanted. He would buy back Yelver Castle and have a seal ring with his arms and *"I Saye and I Doe"* engraved on it, and once more reign over broad ancestral acres—Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême.

Perhaps, on the whole, he'd talk it over first with Mr. Mummery, but go, he would.

CHAPTER IX

"NOW, perish me pink, if that isn't funny, young Bob," said Joe Mummery, after patiently hearing what Otho had to say on the subject of escaping from Tonbury and the Briggs household.

"Funny? I don't find it very funny, Joe," said the boy. "It is not funny to me, to know that I owe my board and lodging and clothes to Mr. Briggs, a man whom I detest. . . . And that my mother owes everything to him, as well."

"And that's where you're wrong again too, young Bob," interrupted the sailor, "and if it's any comfort to you to know it, I'll tell you. You don't owe anything at all to Bill Briggs. Not a farthen."

Otho stared.

"Who then?" he asked. "You?"

"It was the Old Pirate that said Mary was to be fetched to the house, the moment it was known the Dook was dead and the brokers in. . . . He looks after Mary, an' she don't cost the Briggses anything. T'other way round if anything. . . . But don't you go and say anything."

"And who pays for me? You, Joe?" asked the boy.

"Well—me and the Old Pirate fixed it up to see how you shape. An' you're a prime favourite with the Old 'Un—*I* can tell you. . . . But what I was going to say was funny, was your coming to me to-day to say you wasn't going to be a plumber, and want to sheer off to London or somewhere or to run away to sea or to go as Boy in the Navy."

"Why funny to-day, particularly?" asked Otho.

"Because I was going to speak to you to-day, on that very subject, and to tell you that you didn't want to be a plumber an' get apprenticed to old Bill Briggs, because I've got an idea. . . . I got it at Oxford, where I've been to see old Slogger Price an' give an exhibition sparrin' bout with him to the young toffs there. . . . Asked me to referee in their annual contest of the runners-up to select the men for their

annual contest that they have every year against Cambridge College, they did. . . . A fine, up-standin' lot of clean fighters there were too, and well trained and taught by old Slogger Price—whom I could have knocked out in every round, twice, for he's *slow*, he is, though a man with a punch in each hand, an' can take his gruel as good as any man that ever stepped into a ring."

"Where's the funny idea, Joe?" interrupted the boy.

"Well, the idea isn't funny, Bob," was the reply. "What I says was funny was your coming to me to-day and meeting the idea half-way like. Because the idea's this. Why not you go to this Oxford College place, and be one of the toffs there yourself—for a toff you are, my boy—and be old Slogger Price's prize favourite, an' become the Heavy-Weight Champion of Oxford? . . . Then you'd be fair started in the boxing world. . . . Then have a go for the Amateur Champion of England—and then go into the ring professionally, if you shaped like it. Champion of England, Europe—of the *World*, me boy, and then retire an' live like a gentleman that you are."

"Go to Oxford?" breathed Otho, his face paling, and his eyes shining with excitement.

To live among people of his own class again. . . . To begin that rehabilitation of his name and line, upon which he was so bent. . . . Education. . . . Leisure. . . . Escape from the Briggs atmosphere. . . . Freedom.

"It costs a frightful lot, Joe," he said with a sigh. "It couldn't be done."

"It could be done, Bob," was the reply, "and there's those who'll do it. You give me your dying-oath-promise you'll work hard, and to Oxford College you go."

"Work hard for an Honours degree! . . ." said Otho, his face again lighting up. . . . "Rather!"

"I'm not talkin' about degrees, either of latitude or of longitude, me lad," said Mummery. "I said *work* hard, and I mean it. Work hard at what Slogger Price tells you, and if he says you have got to put on thicker belly-muscles you've got to work till he's satisfied. And if he says you're too heavy anywhere, you've got to work it off. An' if he says you're not carrying a punch in your left hand, you're got to work hard at the bag until you are! See?"

Otho smiled. "Yes," he said. "I see. Go up to Oxford

and strive by obedience, diligence and industry to win—the approval of Slogger Price!"

"That's it, me boy," said Mummery heartily, beaming upon Otho, and smiting him on the shoulder with a ham-like hand.

"And Oxford's got lots of advantages," continued Mummery.

"So I've heard," agreed the boy dryly. "There are people who consider an Oxford education quite a good thing."

"Lots of advantages," repeated the increasingly enthusiastic Josephus. "You'd get any number of different sparring partners, and practise with blokes, taller, shorter, heavier, quicker, all sorts, than what you are. . . . 'Sides, Slogger Price is an A 1 at Lloyd's, triple-expansion, copper-bottomed Instructor. I could fight ten rounds with the best man in Europe and then take on old Slogger afterwards—for he's slow—but he may be a better Instructor than I am. See?"

"Yes," said Otho. "Great are the advantages of a University Career!"

"And you'll have a proper ring there, and no hole-and-corner business, keepin' it dark from the women-folk, like we have to here. . . . I taught you a lot, Bob, and I'm proud of my pupil, boy—but you want a gymnasium and all proper, and give your whole time to it. Then you'll do some good at it. See? . . . You don't want to be one of these half-and-half boxers—an' there's millions of 'em—thankful to get a quid to let anyone punch their face, and ready to hold the loser's end of any double-cross frame-up for some rising young bloke's advantage."

"I really don't," agreed Otho, smiling sweetly.

"Why—half these Young Bill So-and-So's and Young Ted What's-his-name's that get into the sportin' papers and want to get into the ring at the National Sporting Club and such places . . .

"They climb up by having terrific combats with these old stony-broke pugs and arrange what rounds the poor jossers are to knocked out in, and whether it's to be a wonderful lightning victory in one-minute-twenty-seconds, or a marvelous exhibition of dauntless, dogged British pluck lastin' twenty-five rounds and ending in a heart-stirring triumph for the popular hero. . . .

"No—it's Championship you've got to go for. Amateur

first—to show you're square, and to interest the Fancy, and then all-out for professional Champion of the World. That's what I call Ambition, boy—and you've got the makings too—both the strength, the build, the heart and the guts. And you'll have the skill too, by the time me and Slogger Price have done with you. You were born a fighter and we'll make you a boxer. . . . That's Ambition, son."

"It's certainly an ambition, Joe," smiled Otho, as Joe Mummery, with shining eye and beaming face, seized his hand.

"Then you'll go to Oxford and work hard, Bob?" asked Joe.

"Who's going to pay? And how am I going to re-pay?" asked the boy.

"We'll put up the money all right, Bob," was the reply. "And if you're going to do us credit, there's no talk of re-paying."

"I'd love to go, Joe," said Otho. "More than I could tell you. But I'd want to know how much was spent and who spent it, and I'd want to pay it all back later on. . . . So that the money was invested in me rather than spent on me."

"Talk about that later, boy. . . . All right. . . . What you've got to do now, is to work hard an' keep fit—an' hold just one thought in your mind, *'I'm goin' to be Champion Heavy Weight of Oxford, for a start,'* see?"

"Yes. I suppose you know it takes three years to get through Oxford? You can't go for less, and some fellows stay four or five years getting 'double-firsts' and so on."

"Well—you can make a three-year cruise of it then, can't you, Bob? Win the Championship in your last year—or each year. Leave there when you're twenty an' give yourself two year of the best trainin' that money can buy, get the Amatoor Championship, an' then go steady for the World's Championship. . . . You'll be a Heavy Weight, Bob, like meself—an' about the same build. Thirteen-stone-seven you'll be, at twenty-one. . . . We'll put up the money all right, Bob. You go, me boy."

§ 2

Otho lay awake in bed that night, too excited to sleep, revolving in his mind the remarkable suggestion and offer made by Joe Mummery.

What a chance! What a wonderful start on the ladder that was to lead up to the social and financial level upon which he could find his rightful place, and once again be Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême of Yelver Castle. Education . . . Culture . . . Association with people of his own class,—people of birth and breeding. . . . He would be like a fish put back into water. . . . Saved from being a plumber's apprentice and made an under-graduate of Oxford University! . . . And he wondered if ever before in the thousand-year history of Oxford, a youth had been made an alumnus of the glorious place—by a prize-fighter in order that he might become a prize-fighter!

He would certainly have to win that Championship. It would be only fair to Joe, who had set his heart upon it—but he would also get a brilliant degree and row in the Oxford and Cambridge boat-race. He would make a name for himself, and later, he would take his rightful name too—when he had made a lot of money. Yes—a Double-First and a Blue, and then the Bar, or anywhere else where money is to be made with honour and distinction. Just enough money to buy back Yelver Castle and to live there in decent comfort as a really good landlord. Margaret's social equal again. . . . Then Parliament and a hand in governing England as England should be governed, for the greatest good of the greatest number, and a glorious Imperial destiny as the peace-keeper of the world. . . . He sat up in bed, a queer, earnest figure, with white face and shining eyes.

"I will go to Oxford. I will do my absolute best. I will get back Yelver Castle and my name. . . . *'I Saye and I Doe,'*" he said aloud; and that being settled satisfactorily, he lay down and went to sleep.

§ 3

The news that Otho was to go to Oxford was variously received in the Briggs household.

Great-Grandpapa Hawkins seemed to know all about it, and to be strongly in favour of the step.

"You go, my son," he said. "Get education. . . . Education's the only difference between fore and aft. Why's some in the fo'c'sle an' some in the cabin? Education! What's the difference between swabbin' and navigatin'? Education!

. . . Yes—you go there and learn triggernomitry an' astronermy an' how to shoot the sun an' work out yer latitood an' longitood—as well as how to use your fistes. That's useful enough, as Joe ses, an' there's money in it for the real clippers—but you get education too, me boy. . . . An' don't take any notice o' your Uncle Bill Briggs, for he's got no more sense than a sick sea-louse. Biggest blasted fool and hymn-howling humbuggin' hyena born since the days o' tops'les. Tell him I said so. If I spoke to him meself, I might say something rude."

Lady Mandeville-Bellême and her sister, Mrs. Briggs, were warmly in favour of the scheme.

"Quite the little gentleman, he'll be," beamed Mrs. Briggs, endeavouring to plant a moist kiss upon his face.

"An' you won't get ashamed of your old mother, will you, dearie?" said Lady Mandeville-Bellême.

"Yes—heartily—if you talk such nonsense, Mother," her son replied, putting his arm round where he judged her waist to have been.

Uncle Bill Briggs had never heard such nonsense in his life.

"A wicked waste of money! Turning an honest plumber into a wretched school-teacher or clurk or something—probably a sponging loafer. Why not earn some money instead of squanderin' it, bein' a great bloomin' over-grown schoolboy. Got a good chance to be an honest plumber—an' you chuck it away!

"Be callin' yourself a Lord or Baronet or something like your drunken father, next, I suppose?" he added. . . . "Wot's Grandfather say?"

"Well," replied Otho, "among other things he says you haven't the sense of a sea-louse, and that you are, in his considered judgment, the—er—biggest fool and humbugging hyena born since topsails went out of fashion. He asked me to mention it to you. . . . I do so without comment."

Uncle Bill Briggs looked murderous, picked up a piece of lead-piping—and laid it down again. This was neither a George nor a Bert.

"You impident young hound," he shouted. . . . "I . . ."

"How?" interrupted Otho. "You asked me what Grandfather said, and I have told you. Part of it. The other part was that he fully approved of the idea."

"You're after his bit o' money—that's wot's wrong with you," growled Mr. Briggs, as Otho passed on through the shop.

"Oh—go to the devil and plumb the sinks of Iniquity," he said rudely, as he shut the door, and laughed aloud.

Life was a matter for laughter nowadays. . . . Oxford—and the world of culture, refinement, spaciousness, leisure, and above all, opportunity. Opportunity for work, congenial work; for success; for realising a high ambition. . . . Heaven reward dear old Braddle. . . . Without his help he could never have hoped to get even into St. Simeon's Hall.

As the days passed and possibility became probability, hope became faith, faith crystallised towards fact, he laughed more often and more naturally; the expression of his face changed, he carried himself more lightly, he expanded and developed as a flower in a morning of sun after a night of rain. . . . Braddle had been successful and all was arranged. But Otho would have to live out of College.

George's attitude was, "Go to Oxford? . . . Go to Hell so long as you don't go plumbing with the Ole Man. . . . But don't let them make an under-paid clerk of you, Bob—like me—when you got a chance to be a working-man an' touch good wages."

Bert heard the news with undisguised contempt and some annoyance.

"Overgrown schoolboy!" he sneered. "'Ere, Liz—young Bob Blame's goin' to Oxford College to learn to be a toff. End up as bloomin' parson—to be kep' all 'is life by honest workin'-folks. . . . Streuth!"

"He's going to be wot he is, and wot you will never be," replied Liz cryptically, to her brother's annoyance.

"There's no bein' up-sides with you nowadays. Sometimes anybody'd think you fair hated the bloke, and other times nobody can say a word against him," grumbled Bert. And Liz smiled enigmatically at herself in the fly-blown mirror, patting her side-curls the while.

The Pastor of the Chapel wherein the Briggs family worshipped, being duly apprised of the astounding event, took it very seriously and informed Otho that thousands, yes, tens of thousands of better men than he, far better men, would be prepared to give their right hands for such a wonderful,

such a glorious, chance as he had had offered to him. He only hoped, he earnestly hoped, that Otho would profit by this golden opportunity, and bring credit upon his kind relations who were making this wonderful sacrifice for him. . . . And who, by the way, was finding the money? . . . Yes—a glorious chance, and had the Lord but seen fit to soften Otho's hard young heart and turn his thoughts to the Ministry —what a chance! What a chance!

Otho gathered that the Pastor did not, in his heart of hearts, think much of the Lord's arrangements in giving Otho opportunities denied to better men.

§ 4

The months that followed were a strenuous time of hard work, physical and mental; work under the direction of Joe Mummery, at the punching-bag, dumb-bells, "physical jerks," morning running and evening sparring; work by candle-light, in his attic, at the *Gallic War* of Cæsar, the *Anabasis* of Xenophon, Greek and Latin Grammar and "unseens," algebra, Euclid and arithmetic, with a view to being in a position to present himself, at as early a date as possible in his academic career, for the examination known as Responsions, the first of the three gateways to the degree of B.A.

The sooner he could pass that and the next one, known as Moderations, the sooner he could drop these odds-and-ends of schoolboy Classics and read for his Honours Final. With luck and hard work, he might be able to devote two of his three years to the last—and get a First. And then—the world would be at his feet, and with a Blue and a First, what could he not achieve? . . .

Day-dreams. . . . But day-dreams severely limited and checked by Reality; day-dreams backed by ambition, will-power and a clear, definite and attainable goal.

§ 5

And one day, a day devoted to a long country walk to Melston, in the interests of both kinds of work, he met Jack and Margaret Maykings, and his first impulse was to dash through the hedge and run.

His ingenuous countenance flushed hotly, paled, and then

settled into a mask of somewhat sulky hauteur, as he realised that he was face to face with Margaret.

As a flood of memories of Big Attic and the Castle gardens swept across his mind, he set his mouth the more firmly, lest his lips should tremble—in a feeble silly smile. He was astonished that Margaret had grown so. She was almost a woman, and would be an extremely pretty one, her face more serious, her manner more adult, and her greeting as kindly and affectionate as ever. . . . She was adorable.

Jack Maykings, growing enormously big, and more and more like his father, was as hearty, amiable, and friendly as the most exacting former-friend could possibly demand. Any least lack of warmth that could have been registered by the most sensitive social thermometer would have been attributable to Otho, and not to these friends and companions of his boyhood.

Unintentionally and half-unconsciously he contrasted Jack Maykings' easy, comfortable, well-cut country clothing with his own abominable ready-made town suit.

"How do you do?" he said, raising his cap.

"'Tho, dear!" replied Margaret, extending both hands. "I thought I was never, never going to see you again!"

"Hul*lo,* old chap," said Jack heartily. "Well, this *is* a treat!" He went on to explain that Dr. Maykings had driven them over to Melston, where he had to spend several hours, and would be driving back to Yelverbury after an early tea.

"Come back to lunch with us at the 'White Hart,' 'Tho," said Margaret. "Do. Dad would be delighted to see you again. He often speaks of you and of what a fine boxer you are. . . . And no one will ever know how I missed you—at first—when you left the Castle. . . . I believe I howled every night for a week," and the girl laughed merrily.

"Of course he'll come," beamed Jack, over his Old Etonian tie. But Jack was wrong, for Otho would not.

Not for anything would he have gone to lunch with them, conscious of frayed trousers, frayed linen, the reach-me-down clothes of a young mechanic, and a sense of utter "wrong-ness" in every detail. Probably his very voice, accent, and manners were as different from theirs now, as were the cut, kind, and condition of his clothes. Nor did he wish, under the kindly patronising questions of Dr. Maykings, to state that he lived over a plumber's shop, the shop of his Uncle

Bill Briggs; had just left the Tonbury Grammar School, and was now going up to Oxford, to its smallest and cheapest College, at the expense of a prize-fighter, an old flame of his mother's, who hoped to become his step-father. . . . Of these things and of these people he was not ashamed, but he had no desire to talk about them nor to explain all his narrow circumstances to Doctor, and Jack Maykings.

But could he and Margaret have sat them down in a shady corner of some woodland dell, with a packet of sandwiches—that would have been a luncheon-party that he would have gone a very long way to attend.

"Thanks—I'm afraid I can't," he said.

"Rot! Of course you can, and will," said Jack, insisting.

"My dear 'Tho," expostulated Margaret, her face falling, "you don't mean to say you are going to pass by on the other side like the Levite, do you? We aren't going to let you go like that. . . . Come along, 'Tho, we were just going to turn back when we saw you, and I said to Jack, *'This man, coming, walks like 'Tho used to!'* "

"Thanks. I'll walk on to Melston with you if I may, but I can't lunch to-day, if you'll excuse me."

Margaret looked at him searchingly.

"We won't press you then, 'Tho," she said. "But I'll ask you just once more, when we get to the 'White Hart,' " and they turned in the direction of Melston.

As they walked along, Otho's head in a whirl of painfully delightful memories, and his soul steeped in an ecstatic misery, that kept him tongue-tied and ashamed of himself, Margaret did most of the talking, but, like Jack, asked no questions.

He learnt that all was much as usual at Yelverbury, that Jack had distinguished himself as a boxer at Eton, and in the Public Schools Championship meeting, for three successive years; that Henry Hoalne had won a scholarship at Dover and was going to Oxford, whither Jack was proceeding in October.

"I'm going there too," said Otho, and added "St. Simeon's Hall."

Jack and Margaret, with one accord, stopped and each seized a hand and shook it and him.

"Oh splendid," cried Jack most heartily. "That's great! Oh three loud cheers!"

"Oh, 'Tho, I am so glad," said Margaret, a warm glow suffusing her sweet and lovely face. "Oh I *am* so glad! That's the best news I've heard since you left Yelverbury. . . . I shall see you there, 'Tho. . . ."

For a mad moment Otho glanced at the wild idea of kissing her, in gratitude and affection.

Oh these dear kind people! . . . His own people! . . . This was a foretaste of the new life that was coming to him —thanks to Joe Mummery, pugilist, aspirant to be his step-father.

By the time they reached the busy streets of the Cathedral City, the years had fallen from him, and he was rather Otho Mandeville-Bellême of Yelver Castle, Yelverbury, than "Bob Blame who lives at Briggses."

At the "White Hart" Margaret said, "Come to lunch, 'Tho dear," and again he was the ill-clad uncomfortable lout in reach-me-down clothes, nailed boots and made-up tie.

"I can't to-day. . . . Please excuse me," he replied. "Thanks so much. It has been delightful seeing you again . . ." and raising his cap—oh, beastly common cap!—he turned and walked rapidly away.

§ 6

On hearing of the encounter, Dr. Maykings was greatly interested. Suddenly he looked thoughtful. "Going to Oxford," he said. "H'm! . . .

"Has he grown much?" he asked.

"He's huge," replied Margaret. "Splendidly tall and big . . . and so handsome. He's bigger than Jack now."

"H'm," mused the doctor. "If he takes up boxing, you might meet him in the Selection Finals, Jack. Lucky you'll not be too heavy for the Light-Heavies, at the outside."

"Yes," agreed Jack. "We shall be in different classes, and if he were in the Light-Heavies I could train down to Middles. I am certainly not nearly as heavy as he is."

Father and son fell silent, both looking very thoughtful indeed.

"Yes, you'd have your work cut out to get your boxing half-blue, my boy," observed Dr. Maykings after lunch, as he poured himself a glass of port. "Slogger Price'll have to watch it, and you'll have to train like a Pro, by Jove."

"I'll uphold your reputation all right, Sir," smiled Jack valiantly. "I have beaten him once you know."

"On points," murmured Margaret.

§ 7

Walking back to Tonbury, a pennyworth of apples his lunch, Otho lived over again the heart-stirring episode, tried to repeat each word that had been uttered and to reconstruct each scene—the meeting, the walk, the reception of the news about Oxford, the parting. Then for each of his own miserable, halting utterances he substituted something brilliant or impressive.

What had they thought of him? What had they thought of his awful clothes? ("Never noticed them, of course," said his better self.)

What a delightful pair! . . . Something of a contrast to Bert and Liz, for example.

What a big powerful chap Jack had grown, and what a beautiful woman Margaret was going to be. . . . And how utterly delightful to be with them again! . . . Paradise regained. . . . And the next time he met her (at Oxford!) he wouldn't be at quite such a disadvantage, nor feel himself such a short-sleeved, short-trousered, dingy-linened hobbledehoy.

For weeks thereafter Margaret rather hoped for a letter from her old playmate, but hoped in vain.

At length she wrote one to him, a long letter telling him what joy it had given her to see him again; what misery she had experienced after his sudden departure, four years ago, from Yelver Castle; what hopes she had for his happiness and success at Oxford; what grateful memories she treasured of glorious days of fun in Big Attic and the Grounds.

She concluded with the words:

"I do love you so, dear darling 'Tho. I always did . . ." and promptly burnt the letter. . . . What was the good? . . . Sloppy stuff . . . Sentimental . . . Tripe . . .

CHAPTER X

THE triumphal entry of John Maykings, Esq., upon his career as an undergraduate member of the University of Oxford, differed considerably from that of Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, *alias* Robert Blame.

Jack arrived at the commodious station of the Ancient Seat of Learning with his friend Jules Maligni, now a famous and magnificent second-year man of his own College, and a compartmentful of Good Eggs, to whom Jules introduced him. And Jules, having the gift of dealing skilfully with balls of all kinds, and being therefore respected, popular and eminent, was an invaluable sponsor to a Fresher, a creature liable to be considered guilty, until proved to be innocent, of being an outsider, a worm, a squirt, a tick, and a Bad Man.

It was a third-class compartment—because only the most terrible of bounders, outsiders and Bad Men, travelled first or second class when going up to, or down from, Oxford—and by the time it reached Oxford, was filled with the spirit of good-fellowship, cheery laughter, and the smoke of expensive fancy mixtures from carefully-polished bulldog pipes.

At Oxford station Jules' manner changed, as may that of a Colonel towards a subaltern, as environment changes from the Mess ante-room to that of the parade-ground.

Jack felt that Jules had become older, sterner, more dignified and less approachable—in short, a second-year man in the horrid presence and deplorable company of a Fresher, a creature that may at any moment bring an ineffaceable stigma and undying opprobrium upon itself and its friends, by some such shocking act as carrying an umbrella when in cap and gown, wearing a silk hat, using gloves and an overcoat, or possessing sugar-tongs.

However, he was permitted to share a cab with his senior, and as they drove up the hill past the castle mound, across Carfax, and down the High, he was filled with joyous excite-

ment, and was glad that he had a friend, however frigid, bored and superior, with whom to enter the portals of the College.

As the cab stopped at the entrance to the quadrangle of St. Just's, a servant-like man in well-cut clothes which had not been originally made for him, emerged from his lurking-place in the great Tudor gateway, and did obeisance, seized and shouldered a portmanteau, and disappeared across the quad, having remarked: "Same rooms, Mr. Maligni, Sir?" and waited not for a reply.

As the two undergraduates passed into the entry, the head-porter thrust his shrewd and foxy face through the window of the porter's lodge.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said he, and, as Jules replied with an off-hand "Hullo, Potter," asked Jack for his name, told him that his rooms were in "Little" and "Three, two pair, left," vanished, to pop out again with the information that Ross was his servant and would "do" for him.

"He'll do for Ross, if he doesn't," observed Jules. "Frightful blood with his fists," but the man had again vanished, only to appear a second later with the remark:

"Your luggage hev arrove, Sir," and vanish again, ere Jack's "Thank you, Potter," was enunciated.

"Call him Pott, while you are a Fresher," advised Jules, as they crossed Big Quad in the direction of Maykings's rooms.

"Why?" asked the latter.

"Because it's his name," was the reply.

"You can call him Potter next year," continued Maligni, "and any sort of Pott you like in your Third Year. Some senior fellows call him Pottiphar. Fourth Year men generally call him Moab. . . . I don't know why. . . . He hates fellows to presume with a precocity beyond their Years, and gets his own back on them in various ways. . . . He's an awful swine, but quite a good sort, really."

And so conversing of high matters, they reached Maykings's staircase, and Maligni committed him to the care of his scout, Albert Ross, who proved to be as little like the scout in "Charley's Aunt" as a gentlewoman is like a Perfect Lady.

"Hallo, Albatross," quoth Maligni, "this is Mr. Maykings," and Albert Ross murmured his joy and "Three, two pair left, your luggage hev arriven, Sir," in one breath.

"If he doesn't give you the completest satisfaction at any time, you have only to say like the Ancient Mariner,

'And round my neck, just like a cross,
They've hung this blasted Albert Ross,'

to him. He hates it like anything."

Maykings was delighted with his sixteenth-century rooms, a large bright "sitter," a smaller "bedder," and a kind of pantry, box-room, and cupboard-under-the-stairs combined.

The panelled sitting-room was comfortably furnished with good, shabby, old furniture: deep inviting arm-chairs, a huge table, roomy book-shelves, and a most attractive desk,—suggestive of secret drawers and lost parchments,—being the most prominent articles. The bedroom was spartanly equipped with a narrow bed, a dressing-table, a wash-stand, a cane-chair and a hip-bath.

A blazing fire, in the sitter's huge old fireplace, gave an air of cosy comfort at variance with the grey coldness of the chill raw day without. . . . Jolly cosy place. . . . His very own place, where he would live and move and have his being, independent and untrammelled. . . . He had arrived; he had grown up. . . . And he would unpack his books, pictures and minor details of garnishment and furnishings, and then wrestle with such new and strange ideas and institutions as "battels," "commons," "buttery-hatches," "hall," "J.C.R.," "squash games," "proggins," "Freshers'-wines," "bonners," "the bursar," "Senior Tutor," "the Dean," "leckers," "gates," "chapels," "tubbing" (for he meant to row as well as to box), and innumerable others of which he had heard. . . . Also he would become a Blue and a Blood and be very popular and respected—and meantime he was an inconsiderable and unconsidered tick of a Fresher; also rather hungry.

How did one summon the Albertross by the way, with a view to allaying that same hunger; and did one say, "Please bring me some battels and commons from the buttery-hatch," —and what was under the lid of the raised dais that formed a sort of window-seat in the bay? It proved to be coals.

Jolly old world.

§ 2

Earlier on the same day, "Robert Bellême" came into residence as an undergraduate member of the University of Oxford, in a somewhat different manner.

He came by a depressed and humble-seeming train that fumbled its way through the fog and rain, stopping at every wayside station.

In his compartment were a commercial-traveller, who smoked a large and much-carven meerschaum pipe, with reverent care; an old country-woman, who had a determined but particularly worthless-looking cat, in an inadequate basket when it was not out of the basket; and a sailor of the King's Navy, who offered rum to all four.

On being rebuffed by the commercial-traveller, he observed that that gentleman had a face like a mouldy seaboot, and that he had expected precisely such action on his part. On being courteously but firmly refused by Otho, he remarked that he had a face like a scrubbed 'ammock, but doubtless could not help it; and upon receiving warm thanks and appreciation from the old country-woman, stated that she was the first lady he had ever met who completely took the wind out of the sails of Lily Langtry.

He further essayed to give the cat a drop, but failed to administer the liquor, internally, to the animal, whose teetotal prejudices proved insurmountable, and forced the sailor to the conclusion that taking it by-and-large, considering it fore-and-aft, making every allowance, and speaking with due regard for its mistress's feelings, it was not much superior to the commercial-traveller in conduct, appearance, or value.

At Oxford, Otho had his tin trunk consigned to the cloak-room, and set out, on foot, in search of St. Simeon's College.

It was raining steadily, and Oxford, between the station and Carfax, at any rate, looked dreary, dirty and depressing. Arrived in the High, he was not cheered by the noble fronts of St. Mary's, All Souls College, University College, Queen's and Magdalen, because he could not see them for fog. He was only conscious of mud, undergraduates, lighted shop-windows, cabs, and the common bustle of the High Street of any common town.

Finding, at length, that he had crossed a bridge and seemed to be leaving Oxford altogether, he stopped a passing pedestrian and made inquiries.

"I *berleaf* it's oppersight Magdalen, if there *is* sech a place," said the man cryptically, and pointed in the direction whence Robert had come.

At any rate, it appeared better to turn back, locate Magdalen, and ask again.

Five minutes later, having re-crossed the bridge, he asked a stunted but sophisticated boy, where Magdalen College was.

"I *did* 'ear that it 'adn't bin moved and was in about the same place as usual," replied the boy. . . . "Yus, so it is," he nodded, and pointed across the road, to where the faintly-suggested outline of a mighty square tower loomed in the fog. But he had never heard of St. Simeon's College.

"*St. Simeon's?*" pondered he. . . . "Dunno, Guvner. . . . Only lived 'ere since I was born. . . . Sure you don't mean the Clarendon 'Otel nor the Gaol?"

Otho disliked the rude, dirty and ugly boy. He disliked his horrible local accent. (He had not come to Oxford to find Tonbury.) He firmly declined to purchase a filthy, disintegrating, and probably obsolete, copy of the *Oxford Magazine,* which, the urchin assured him, would tell him all about St. Simeon's, as well as all the winners, and every detail of yesterday's great fight between the Vice-Chancellor and the Bishop of Oxford for a nundred pahnds a side.

Otho's third effort was more successful, and the mighty policeman at Carfax, courteous and helpful, directed him to the hiding-place of St. Simeon's College.

Here the porter identified him and handed him over to a man who personally conducted him to the Bursar. This gentleman questioned him with cold interest, pierced him with a cold gaze, and sent him with scant instructions to find Dr. Bland.

Dr. Bland, behind a great and handsome desk in a great and handsome study, proved to be a dread Olympian person, looking like a burly bearded Bishop in a cap and gown. He gave Otho further information and advice, terrified him with booming voice and fiercely-wise all-seeing eye, and then reassured and conquered him with a most friendly and fatherly smile.

"He's rather like what I imagined God to be, when I was a child," thought Otho.

He faded from the presence of the Dean with feelings of respectful awe, and a great desire to please, and proceeded, by request, to the Library, in search of Mr. Trinder, at whose feet he was to sit while preparing for the examination known as Responsions.

Having found Mr. Trinder he decided that he would lose him again when opportunity offered, for Mr. Trinder was an acid and unfriendly man, who appeared to regard under-graduates as absolute mistakes—mistakes that ought to be rectified. . . . He escaped from this gentleman, feeling that the world was large and that he was small in the world.

Proceeding to the Junior Common Room, he found it to be a big and well-furnished combination of lounge, sitting-room and writing-room. At one end was a large fireplace and a roaring fire, around which sat a circle of young men, arrayed in Norfolk jackets, strange waistcoats, and grey flannel trousers. All were smoking bulldog pipes. He would have liked to join them and listen to their conversation, but as they eyed him with a look of pained surprise and wonder, more in sorrow than in anger and less with hatred than contempt, he withdrew.

Perhaps they were important Seniors, into whose presence no Freshman should lightly stray? Or was it that his clothing stamped him as Wrong—too Common even for a Common-room?

As he was about to leave the building, it occurred to him that he was homeless.

Where did one live and eat and sleep while preparing to scale the heights of academic fame?

He went back and propounded this conundrum to the clerk in the office, and was presented with a printed list of licensed lodgings.

In any of these he might dwell, selecting as his purse or fancy prompted him. Should he shut his eyes, dab his finger on the list, and proceed to the address to which it pointed?

"I sh'd go and see if Mrs. Thynne is full," suggested the clerk. "I've heard that she's quite good . . ." and added, "Her rooms are among the cheapest on the list."

"An excellent recommendation," said Otho. "Thanks," and departed, glad to hear of the cheapest rooms he could get, but not particularly glad that the clerk's trained eye and intuition should have led that gentleman to suggest them. Decidedly he must endeavour to acquire a Norfolk-jacket, noisy waistcoat, grey flannel trousers and a bulldog pipe.

He could then keep his "best" clothes, which he was now wearing, for use at Tonbury during vacations,—which he

understood to occupy some twenty-eight weeks of the year. Fancy seven months' holiday!

The fog was thinning a little, though the rain still fell steadily, and it did not take him much more than half an hour to find his way, by diligent inquiry, to the abode of Mrs. Thynne.

Mrs. Thynne *was* full, but not too full to talk strict business, albeit a little discursively.

PART III

CHAPTER I

OTHO sat at work, his books covering one half of the dingy chenille tablecloth, his frugal supper of bread and cheese occupying the other half, and awaiting his attention.

"Nothing to get cold anyhow," he said aloud, as his eye rested on the stale-looking bread, the experienced and somewhat dusty gorgonzola cheese, and the too-yellow butter in its dish of greenish glass which had begun life as a mantelpiece-ornament of the baser type, and had been promoted to the higher usefulness as the result of a fall that had deprived it of its handle and beautiful central excrescence.

Returning to his work, he stumbled on through a page of the *Anabasis* of Xenophon, with the aid of a Greek dictionary and occasionally of a Bohn translation and, alas, an interworded "key" which was grateful and comforting and, in very difficult places, useful, in that it rendered him certain, beyond peradventure of a doubt, as to which line of Greek in the text corresponded with the line of English in the translation. (He had great sympathy with an unfortunate youth, who in "Collections" had given an admirable rendering of a Xenophon extract, a rendering which failed only in the fact that it related to another and wholly different paragraph of the gifted Greek author's immortal work.)

As the cheap and ugly clock struck ten at a quarter-past nine, he threw down his pencil, yawned and stretched.

"Supper," he murmured, and fixed a speculative eye upon the butter. "By-product of the carpet-dyeing industry. . . . Plain living and high thinking. . . . High thinking. . . . High thinking. . . . High-thinking cheese too. . . . Gorgonzola, sinister and realistic. . . . Sinister as the Gorgon and realistic as Zola."

He rose from his plush-upholstered, but unstable chair, and paused as a clatter of feet and a babel of voices sounded outside. The front-door, only fastened at midnight, was flung

open, and a mob of youths swarmed along the passage and up the stairs.

From the room above came sounds of a scuffle, protesting yelps, loud laughter, and whoops of joyous savagery. Evidently a "rag" was in progress.

"Friend Jackson in trouble, apparently," remarked Otho to the cheese, as he removed a large portion and a small intruder.

Ere he finished his meal, a human avalanche descended the stairs and swept noisily through the passage and out of the house, a strange silence succeeding the din.

A minute later, a knock upon Otho's door was followed by the entrance of a pale and trembling youth whom, at first sight, he took to be a stranger.

The familiar sound of a quavering voice assisted a hard stare to achieve Otho's recognition of the once bearded Jackson—now clean-shaven and vastly improved in appearance.

"Hallo, Jacker!" said Otho, identity established. "Been entertaining?"

"Oh, I say, Bellême! Oh dear! Oh dear!" bleated Jackson. "Isn't that a disgraceful outrage?"

"Who've you been outraging now?" asked Otho.

"It's abominable. I could cry with mortification and—and—impotent rage," continued Jackson.

"You mustn't cry here," said Otho. "Mustn't mortify. Mustn't be impotent. Mustn't rage. . . . What's it all about?"

"I have been forcibly shaved! I . . ."

"Tremendous improvement, if I may say so," ventured Otho. "Free too, I suppose?"

"It's abominable! Disgraceful! Outrageous! I . . ."

"I like it," affirmed Otho. "You look quite human now. So open. *Ingenuous vultus puer.* . . . You did rather lurk in that jungle you know. . . . 'Oyster in ambush' sort of idea."

"What would you do about it, if you were me, Bellême?"

"Write them a warm letter of thanks and ask them if they mean to do it regularly. . . . They ought to do it at least twice a week, to keep you looking nice and fresh. . . . I should suggest Saturdays and Wednesdays. If I were you, that is. If you were me though, you'd bash each one of them separately."

"What would you have done—I mean at the time—if it had been you, Bellême?"

"Punched them on the nose, Jacker," replied Otho.

"There were eight or nine noses," pointed out Jackson.

"Eight or nine punches," answered Otho.

"I don't fight," said Jackson with dignity.

"No," said Otho dryly.

"They talked about coming down to rag you, after me," said Jackson.

"Wonder why they didn't," mused Otho.

"Pocke said it was greedy and extravagant, using two of us up in one evening," replied Jackson.

"Oh, it was the Pocke's gang, was it? That crew that call themselves 'The Mohocks' and wear a 'Mohock' tie—the puerile pups," said Otho.

"That's the band," agreed Jackson. "An awful set of wasters. Do not work themselves and interfere with people who do. . . . Try to be 'fast' and think themselves awful bloods. . . . Green, blue and yellow tie."

"Funny children!" said Otho. "Anyhow they've done a good work to-night, Jacker, a far, far better thing than ever they have done before. Brought you out into the light of day. Quite a good-looking chap now. . . . Have some supper?"

And taking the hint, Jackson departed, fingering his denuded face.

What a poor-spirited tick the Jacker was! Of course one man can't deal with half a dozen, but . . .

Surely the Jacker could have put up some sort of a show? Or, at any rate, he could have formed a good resolution—he who was so good at forming good resolutions—to be avenged on each one of them separately and individually, since he couldn't do much with them as a gang.

But no, the Jacker was not the sort to harbour such unchristian sentiments as vengeance. . . . They had shaved his right cheek and he had turned unto them the other also. . . . Well, every man to his taste, and let every man firmly hold and faithfully follow his own convictions.

Convictions! He, personally, would be convicted of wilful homicide if he had any nonsense from that gang of half-bred, wholly-worthless louts. . . . He had never hit anybody really seriously with his bare fist. . . . Interesting experi-

ence. . . . Entirely justifiable if half a dozen men invaded you with intent to assault, annoy and injure. . . . Pocke, too! . . . Splendid.

There was a knock at the door and Victoria, Mrs. Thynne's maid-of-all-work, entered "to clear away the supper-things, please, Sir."

What an extraordinarily pretty girl she was, thought Otho, his musings switched, by her entry, from battle-field to bower; from a ferocious vision of a Pocke's destruction, to that absolute vision of delight, Victoria. . . . A really and truly lovely girl. . . . Complexion like cream and roses. . . . How trite a simile. . . . Hair like a cornfield in the sun. . . . Trite also. . . . Eyes of cornflower blue and lips of coral, always slightly parted to show teeth of pearl. . . . Not only lovely but lovable. . . . Not only good-looking but looking good. . . . And neat too. . . . Neat figure, neat poor dress, neat feet and ankles, neat way of handling things and of walking. . . . Good carriage . . . and not self-conscious, haughty or impudent. . . . Neither was she on-coming, nor provocative. . . . What a girl to kiss and . . . Here! This would not do! . . . Get thee behind me, Satan—and don't shove me along when you get there, either. . . . One need not look at Victoria, nor be anything else but curtly courteous. . . . He must. . . .

"Anythink else, to-night, Sir?"

Otho almost jumped.

"Er—no. . . . Of course not. . . . Er—no, thank you, Victoria."

"Thank you, Sir. Good night, Sir."

"Good-night, Victoria."

And then he heard her deposit his tray in the hall and go upstairs to Jacker's room.

He could hear the murmur of voices. . . . For quite a long time too. . . . Well—five minutes anyhow. . . .

Confound the miserable Jacker! How dared he keep the girl there talking? . . . Peripatetic pimple. . . . Pious prig.

§ 2

At this same hour, Mr. William Evan Price, better known as Slogger Price, instructor in boxing at the Oxford Univer-

sity Gymnasium, was dictating a letter to his son, an infant prodigy also destined (by his father, if not by Fate) to be a World's Champion.

The letter was directed to Joseph Mummery Esq., and concerned Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, or Robert Blame.

A letter, in short, from an earnest Oxford tutor, to the anxious guardian of a spirited young Gentleman of Quality, concerning the latter's demeanour and progress at that ancient seat of learning—of various kinds.

"*Dear Joe,*" wrote Master Price, by request, "*I don't know what to say but I'll say it all right. . . . He's a marvel. . . . There ian't no doubt about that. . . .*"

"You mean 'there *is* no doubt about that,' Father," observed Master Price, as Mr. Price cogitated.

"Oh I does, do I?" replied Mr. Price heavily. "I s'pose you don't 'alf know better than me what I means, do yer? Not 'arf you do, don't yer? . . . You write what I ses, an' don't let me find no mistakes in it neither. . . . What you think I sends you to St. Barnabas school for, wastin' your time, if you can't write a bloomin' letter without s'much bloomin' talk about it? . . . Shut your 'ead and write this." And Master Price wrote:

"*He's all you said and more and he can go just as fur as he likes. . . .*"

"You *mean* 'fur' I s'pose, Father?" inquired Master Price, "as you said it?"

"*Fur? Fur?* . . . What d'yer mean *'Fur.'* . . . I *said* 'Fur,' didn't I? D'ye s'pose I meant feathers or fish or 'arf-a-lemon, yer young fool? You'll get a clip on the ear-'ole in a minute. . . . O' course I meant *fur,*" grumbled the incensed parent. "You look out fer yer own fur—an' yer 'ide too."

"Right-o, old 'un," replied his dutiful son, with sweet resignation. "'Ave it your own way," and diligently applied himself to the exact rendering of his father's words.

"*As fur as 'e blooming well likes. There never lived a lad of his poundage as quick on his feet or could deliver the goods as prompt and as punctual. His arms is steam-pistons when hitting, and iron-railings when guarding. He builds up a defence there ain't no getting through, and when he hits to hurt, he hurts. He hurts me.*

"When he hits his hardest, somethink happens to what he hits. I tell you, Joe, and I ain't a blood . . . no . . . I means I'm speaking serious, I tell you, Joe, I watch it when I'm sparring with him an' he ses, 'Let's go all out, fer a round, Slogger, an' you knock me out!' He's always saying that. An' I tell you, Joe, one o' these days somethink'll happen—and it'll happen to me. . . . Do you know, I gets the silly idear sometimes that he don't do all he could to me—just as though he thought it would make me look like past me work and not fit for me job if he really got down to it and set about me, Joe. You says, 'Youth will be served, Slogger,' and I says, 'Youth will be served, Joe,' and before very long this lad o' yours could serve us. . . . Me anyhow. . . . And he's never been stretched yet, Joe. Never. There's nobody here could touch him on points; nor nobody here could live one round with him if he wanted to win on a knock-out. He fair plays with them. Plays with 'em merry and bright and amusin' and good-tempered.

"What I wants to see is Mr. Blame in a ring with a man of his own age and poundage—a pro if you like—and Mr. Blame going for him for all he's worth. . . . D'you know who he reminds me of, Joe? He reminds me of John L. Sullivan at his quickest and best, when they called him The Hurricane. What I mean is, he will do, when he's done growing and filled out more. Well, Joe, what I means to say is that he's a marvel and he's a coming World's Champion, for he's got every one of the makings—size, strength, quickness, a punch in both 'ands, and heart—he's all heart—and he loves the game. And he ain't one o' those clever boxers what's what they call temper-a-mental—unless it was bad temper if he got angry about anything. And he wouldn't lose his head and go wild if he did get in a tempcr.

"He'd be all the more dangerous and he wouldn't win or lose on points neither. It'd be a knock-out finish, for one of 'em. He's cool. He's always cool. Well, Joe, I'm doing my best with him and no Instructor couldn't have no better pupil to work with, and I don't mind saying that a year hence I wouldn't want a fifteen-round contest at the N.S.C. with him, nor anywhere else.

"He'll be Heavy-Weight Champion here, for there ain't no Heavy-Weight entries against him, and he will do his first public appearance in the Ring against Cambridge, and he'll

win it too, for he could win the Amateur Championship of England to-morrow and that's all I got to say about it.

"Yours in the pink

"W. E. Price.

"P.S. He's got a lovely punch from the hip. Straight up from the hip when you think he's ducking or side-stepping. Lovely. And I never see better upper-cuts in me life. And he's the finest and cleverest lad at in-fighting that ever I see. Well, Joe, when a lad has got a straight left and a right that would put an ox to sleep and is a wonder at in-fighting, what more d'you want? And you can't hit him, and that's all I got to say about it.

"Well, so long, Joe."

CHAPTER II

RISING from a breakfast-table graced by the remains of a stale loaf, a bilious butter-pat, and a haddock which by any other name would have smelt as sweet, Otho lowered himself gingerly but hopefully into what had once been a perfectly good wicker arm-chair. As he filled his after-breakfast pipe, preparatory to a quarter of an hour's digestive ease, before going forth to lectures at Trinity and Magdalen, he wrestled with the problem that had occupied his mind as he fell asleep overnight.

"I must give a party, Arthur Thynne," said he to the cat that blinked drowsily upon the hearthrug. "A damned tea-party, Arthur. Come?"

The cat yawned and shook its head, being troubled by a fly or the thought of attending a damned tea-party.

"Stop away, then, Arthur," said Otho. "Have some haddock?" and he put the plate of mortal remains on the hearth-rug in front of Arthur Thynne. Arthur rose and walked to the door.

"Don't blame you, Arthur," said Otho. "I felt like that myself. . . . But I've never had the courage of your convictions."

There was a knock at the door, and Victoria entered, like sunshine.

"Good morning, Victoria," said Otho. . . . (What a sheerly lovely girl she was.)

"Goo' morning, Sir," replied Victoria, smiling brightly, and seeing the plate upon the hearthrug, added, "You've never been an' gone an' given your breakfast to the cat, have you, Sir?"

"Never," replied Otho. "I offered him second innings, but he said he wouldn't put a gift haddock in the mouth. Mixes his metaphors frightfully, Victoria."

Victoria smiled uncomprehendingly, but none the less brightly and cleared away.

"Yes, a tea-party!" thought Otho to himself. "Five bob

that I could put to better uses, to give tea and pastry to people who'll say *'Oh damn! Got to fag out to Walton Street to tea with that tick Bellême.'* However, I've been to their beastly teas and they'll have to come to mine. . . . Let's see now. . . . There's dear Henry Hoalne, old Jacker, Mayne, the Ram of Derbyshire—what's his silly name—Ram Das Motiram—can't put 'Ram of Derbyshire' on an envelope—Mellor, Jack Maykings, Vere, Maligni, Palgrave and one or two of the other Bloods, who have honoured me by admission to their hearthrugs. . . . Yes, a bun-scramble. *'I Saye and I Doe,'* " and he rose, took his cap and gown from behind the coal-scuttle, some books from the table, and pursued the horse-tram that was on its journey to Carfax.

In the first lecture-room, he saw Henry Hoalne who pretended not to see him.

"Hi! Bishop-to-be," said Otho. "Will you come to tea with me on Saturday? If you've nothing worse to do. I shall be delighted if you will. Quite like old times."

Hoalne looked uncomfortable. There were several Bloods about. They might notice him talking to Blame and might even overhear the conversation.

"Er—thanks awfully—but I *think* I'm having tea in the High that day, with a St. Just's man; a point of fact our old friend Maligni—Jules Maligni, the Blue."

"Your mistake, Hoalne. He's having tea with me, that day," replied Otho, and hoped that it was so.

Hoalne stared.

"Well, I can't say off-hand," he began. "I must have a look at my engagement-book. It may be some other day. I'll let you know. I'm afraid . . ."

"Right-o," interrupted Otho. "Charmed to see you if you are free, and care to come. Maykings and Maligni will keep you in countenance and support you among the common herd of my acquaintance," and he turned away.

"Poisonous little squirt!" he said to himself. "I shall be rude to him one of these days."

After lectures that morning, Otho went down to St. Simeon's Common Room and wrote his invitations to Maligni, Mellor and Maykings, to Raja Ram Das Motiram, Vere and Mayne. He then buttonholed Jackson and one or two others whom he encountered in the Common Room.

§ 2

The tea-party was not a success.

Mrs. Thynne and Victoria did their best. Arthur Thynne did his worst, by oversetting the cream-jug and removing a cream-bun to the hearth-rug and dealing with it untidily. He added to Otho's annoyance by evading his responsibilities and Otho's Greek Dictionary by way of the window, as Maykings and Maligni entered by the door.

They were as cordial and pleasant as possible, but Otho was aware of Maligni's wandering eye and wondering look, as they talked.

"Contrasting this frowzy hole with his own beautiful Moorish-style boudoir, and being a perfect little gentleman about it," thought Otho, and was ashamed of the thought.

Hoalne arrived a few minutes later, greeted Maykings and Maligni impressively, and, as an after-thought, his host.

The Ram of Derbyshire rolled in, huge, jolly and oily. Seating himself heavily, his chair and his host groaned in unison. What a frightful thing if the heir to a throne were let down, literally and metaphorically.

"I'm afraid that chair isn't ah—er—" began Otho.

"No chair is," tactfully replied the huge young Indian. "The fault is mine, or rather, the misfortune, my dear Sah," and he smiled beatifically.

"I hope your future throne is strong, Rajah," observed Hoalne.

"Thanks to benign British Government," replied Ram Das, as he was generally called, with a bow that imperilled his safety.

Jackson crept in unobtrusively and was introduced to the Bloods.

"Thanks so much," said he, as he shook hands with each, presumably in gratitude for being permitted to do so.

Mayne and Vere arrived together, the former being heard to remark as they mounted the steps, "God! And they give Nansen a medal and things for merely finding the North Pole," and Vere to reply, "Yes—and half the time it isn't there, and you've only their word for it when it is."

The new-comers did not disguise their surprise at finding Maligni and Maykings in this outlandish corner of the Bœotian wilds.

Otho strove valiantly to drive this difficult team and to be the perfect host. He succeeded in appearing more comfortable than some of his guests, who showed a tendency to fall into two distinct groups which could not mingle, and had no point of contact save himself. Jackson did his best to be conversational, but only dared to address his remarks to those he considered his social equals, and obviously annoyed Hoalne by presuming to include him among them.

Maykings, Maligni, Vere and Mayne talked among themselves of matters within their own knowledge and interest, the latter pair making it clear that their College, which was Magdalen, quite recognised the existence, and even the claim to some respect, of the House and St. Simeon's. But Palgrave of Worcester, entering too freely into their conversation, and being asked by Maligni, "Where *is* Worcester?" and Mayne adding, "Yes—I seem to have heard of it," a coolness fell.

No. It was not a great success, and even as Otho was calculating the length of time yet to be endured before the party would break up, the diversion came.

Loud, cheery and raucous voices were heard without; a strange party invaded the front garden; heavy blows were struck by means of the front-door knocker, and, in the ensuing silence, the remark was clearly heard:

"Hope young Bob's at home. I'm fair perishing for my tea," and the reply, "Chuck it, Mother! You aren't going to perish."

Victoria went to the door and, a minute later, ushered in upon the interested assembly, Mr. William Briggs, Mrs. William Briggs, Lady Mandeville-Bellême, Josephus Mummery, Mr. Herbert Briggs, and Miss Briggs.

A frozen silent stillness fell upon the guests as they stared in astonishment.

Was this a clever rag? A leg-pull in somewhat bad taste, arranged by their host?

Rather pale, Otho rose from his seat beside the tea-tray.

"*Mother!*" he said, "this is a surprise! . . . Just in time for tea! How are you, Uncle? How are you, Aunt Aggie? Dear old Joe! And Bert and Liz! Come along . . ." and he kissed his mother, patting her back as he did so.

"Yes, a surprise visit, me boy," said Uncle Bill Briggs, extending his red right hand. "Three bob return half-day

excursion from Lunnon. . . . Gotter go back eight o'clock to-night. Only saw the hand-bills this morning. I ses to your Mother, 'Mary, I ses, let's all go an' see young Bob. I've had about enough o' Lunnon.' Old Joe come along too."

"'Fraid we barged in, like, Bob. Don't want to intrude ourselves on the quarter-deck," said Joe.

"You couldn't intrude anywhere, Joe," replied Otho, seizing his hand. "Come along and have some tea."

"Got a spot o' beer, Bob? That 'ud be more like it!" continued Uncle Bill, as Otho turned to the waiting audience and said:

"My mother, gentlemen . . . Joe Mummery, Heavy-Weight Champion of England . . . Mr., Mrs., Miss and Master Briggs."

"Master" Briggs scowled surlily.

Jack Maykings rose from his chair and came toward the little crowd in the doorway.

"How do you do? I am truly delighted to see you again," he said, taking the hand of Lady Mandeville-Bellême. "One of my very oldest and kindest and dearest friends," he added, turning to the others, who rose and bowed, their ingenuous countenances open books of wonder.

"I do hope you remember me, dear lady," said Maligni, coming forward and bowing gracefully.

Henry Hoalne appeared to be meditating retreat through the window, when Maykings said:

"You remember Hoalne, of course. You used to have him up to the Castle with Margaret and me. . . ."

And Lady Mandeville-Bellême, glad to be able to say something, in her confusion at bursting in upon this convivial party of young gentlemen, cried aloud:

"Why, Henry, my dear, so it is. How you've grown! Quite the young man now! Give my love to your Mother," and Henry Hoalne knew one of the darkest moments of his life.

Affecting to treat it all as a great joke, he laughed, said: "How d'ye do? . . . Hallo! It's half-past five—I must be off," and departed thence.

Maligni turned to Joe Mummery. "Make me a proud man, Mr. Mummery," said he.

"How's that, Mister?" inquired Joe.

"I want to boast that I've shaken hands with you," said Maligni, and turning to Lady Mandeville-Bellême, added, "You're going to be as proud of your son as he is of you. . . . None of us heavy-weights will have a look in, for our boxing half-blue. You must come and see him win it."

"Not me, young gentleman," replied her ladyship. "How you boys can *do* it, beats me. . . . Knocking each other about like savidges—an' you good friends an' all."

"Very true, Mrs," agreed the Ram of Derbyshire, in mellifluous accents, with wise noddings of his ponderous head, which caused his sagacious face to quiver like a chocolate blanc-mange. "What I always say myself. Why should civilised gentlemen batter lineaments of friend of bosom, like heathen raging furiously together?"

"Hear, hear, Mister," agreed Joe Mummery impressively. "Low!"

Otho rang the bell and Victoria appeared.

"We shall want some fresh tea and some more cups, please," said Otho.

"Fresh tea I can do, Sir," replied Victoria, smiling sweetly. "The kettle being on the boil an' all. But more cups you can't, becos you got the lot. But I'll wash 'em just as quick as possible . . . unless you just give each one a swish round like, as you pour out. . . ."

"You out with the tray quick and give half a dozen of them a wash round, my gel," said Lady Mandeville-Bellême, eyeing Victoria very closely, and took the seat urgently put at her disposal by the Ram of Derbyshire.

The Ram admired all buxom females.

He, Maykings and Maligni, having given up their chairs to the ladies, stood talking brightly for a few minutes, and then, with warm farewells, took their departure, thanking their host for a delightful afternoon. Jackson did not so much go or depart, as fade away. Vere and Mayne vied in ardent but honourable, grave but tender, attentions to Liz, who, under their skilful attack, rapidly thawed and changed from frozen silence and extreme hauteur to reproving slaps, shrieks of laughter, and admonitions to behave.

Bert, secure in a perfectly clean, and very tall, collar; beautifully polished, and very pointed, yellow boots; a brave tie whose courage bordered on ferocity, and a new check cap which he swung round and round on the top of his

cane, was kindly entertained by Palgrave of Worcester, who was also entertained by Bert.

Bert offered him what he termed a fag, lit one himself, inhaled the smoke with a clear, if not pleasing, hissing sound, and allowed it to escape only by way of his nose.

"A great technique," murmured Mayne admiringly beneath his breath, as turning from Liz, his fascinated eye was held by Bert's performance.

Mr. Briggs and Mr. Mummery sat in stolid silence, their respective hats upon their knees, and waited patiently for better things. Otho sat between his mother and aunt, holding a hand of each, the better to shake them into a sense of ease and welcome, with the aid of encouraging pats and the sketchy out-lines of the nursery game known as "chimney-pots."

Victoria entered with the tray, and the undergraduate guests departed, Mayne and Vere with languishing looks in the direction of Liz, who had not promised that she would write to both of them.

§ 3

As the front door closed, Josephus Mummery laid a heavy hand upon Otho's shoulder.

"I hope we haven't done you any harm, Bob, boy. Me an' old Bill Briggs here, I mean." (Indignant snort from Mr. Briggs.) "It never entered my fat head you might be having company, like."

"I'd sooner have done anything, Bob dear, than hurt you like that," said his mother.

"Oh, don't be absurd, Mother," smiled Otho. "Nor you, Joe. If any fellow in Oxford has got a better mother than mine, I'd like to see her, and if he's got a better friend than Joe, he's a liar. Now for some tea. You must be dying for a cup."

And after tea, the party sallied forth to see the sights, themselves providing an interesting one in return.

"Is that a genuine backwoodsman trotting his perfectly genuine family round? Or a pious lad acquiring merit at Toynbee Hall?" asked one undergraduate of another, as Otho displayed the glories of St. John's gardens.

"Weird world!" replied the other. "If he's the pious lad,

he certainly loves his neighbour as himself. . . . They generally show these gangs round, like a superior butler conducting a walnut-maggot from the dining-table."

Otho quickly discovered that the interest of the party was more simulated than genuine, and that to some of its members, College Halls, Chapels, the Sheldonian, the B.N.C. knocker, Tom Quad, and Magdalen Tower were attractions of feebler appeal and lesser allure than the bars of the Clarendon, the Mitre and the Randolph.

This was borne in upon Otho when, passing the Mitre and remarking "This is the outside of one of the oldest and most famous inns in England," he received the reply from Mr. William Briggs, "That's what I'm complainin' of, me boy."

Mrs. Briggs, evidently interested, inquired whether it had a nice quiet bar fit for ladies, and Lady Mandeville-Bellême admitted that she could do with a sit-down.

"I've got a better idea than that, Mother," he said, thanking Heaven for an inspiration. "Let's all get down to the Station and go to the lovely Refreshment Rooms there. Then we can sit in peace until the train comes, instead of having to keep an eye on the clock and rush off from here."

"Now you're talkin', me boy," said Uncle William.

"That's right, Bob," agreed Mr. Mummery. "You take 'em all down there an' I'll join you in about an hour. I'm going to sheer off an' see old Slogger Price about your future prospecks. . . . Would he be at the gymmernasium about now? Or at home?"

§ 4

Seated in his arm-chair that night, Otho reviewed the events of that remarkable day.

A queer thing, social customs and class distinctions! They managed these things better in America. Or did they? . . . Anyhow, it was over and, thank God, without any hurt, he believed, to the feelings of his mother and dear old Joe Mummery. The others did not so much matter, with the exception of Aunt Aggie; for they were too well-pleased with themselves to be vulnerable.

The ineffable Bert and his contempt for the "overgrown schoolboys" and their silly caps and gowns!

The remarkable Liz with her giggling squawks, her unfathomable egoism, her shrewd worldliness, her mannered, terrific hauteur—her hot greedy lips in the clinging kiss, which there was no evading, on the platform!

The pious Uncle Bill with his vulgar self-satisfaction, his hopeless coarseness of fibre, his utter insincerity and humbug, his hide like that of a rhinoceros. It *would* be Uncle Bill Briggs who would suggest such a visitation.

What had the fellows thought of them all, and what would they be saying to each other? . . . Not that it mattered what they thought or said. . . .

In point of fact, at that moment, Jack Maykings was saying to Viscount Shannondale and Vere, in the presence of Maligni, a very dark youth called Russel, Mayne and Hoalne, who had dropped in after dinner for coffee and gossip concerning the afternoon's amusement:

"Well, I'm glad you think she's a jolly old geezer and an amusing old dear, for I'll tell you something else she is. She's Lady Mandeville-Bellême, widow of the late Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, of Yelver Castle, Yelverbury, in the county of Kent."

"What the devil! . . . Good Lord! . . . Then that fellow is . . ." began Vere, who had been too intent upon Liz to hear what Maykings had said to the poor lady that afternoon.

"He is," interrupted Maykings, "and if he chooses to call himself Robert Bellême instead of Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, it's nobody's business but his own."

"Oh, yes, he's a baronet all right," agreed Maligni, "and what's more he's a gentleman—and in a different way, her ladyship's a lady."

Henry Hoalne sniggered.

"And a damned hospitable one too, and just full to the brim with kindness—and devilish grateful I—and Hoalne here too—ought to be to her, for the good times she gave us when we were kids. . . . Right up to the day they went smash . . ." said Maykings.

"Poor devil, it's rough luck. . . . For Bellême I mean," said Shannondale.

"He's a gentleman all right," agreed Mayne. "I was filled with admiration at the way he took that invasion. Enough to knock anybody off their perch. Blood tells, what!"

"Yes," said Maykings, "and all this is a breach of con-

fidence—so don't say a word about it. He particularly asked me not to mention his private affairs to anybody—and I shouldn't have done it but for this give-away."

"Baronet married his cook, I suppose," said Mayne.

"Just precisely what he did do," replied Maykings. "A grave *mésalliance* on her part—for a fine woman married a rotten man. . . . And now let's mind our own business. . . . Talk about women being gossips!"

§ 5

"I do hope you'll have a happy week-end, darling," said Mrs. Maykings to her daughter Margaret, as she kissed her Good-night, and referred to her approaching visit to Oxford, to see Jack win his selection-championship.

"Oh, I am so excited, Mother," replied Margaret, her eyes beaming, her hands clasping and unclasping each other.

"About Jack?" asked Mrs. Maykings, smiling quizzically.

"And Otho," replied Margaret truthfully, and taking her mother's hand, drew her down to sit on the side of the bed. "Isn't it rotten luck. . . . Poor old 'Tho. . . . Do you think he'll ever 'come back' as they say? . . . No good being sloppy and sentimental. . . . I shan't chase him, at Oxford. . . . What's the good of raking it all up again. . . . Poor old 'Tho. He'd come running if I whistled."

"I don't like to hear you talk like that, dear," said her mother. "You don't mean it. . . . I'm old-fashioned, I suppose—and I'd certainly never advise a girl to 'make the running' as they call it. . . . Men don't like it. The dear things like to feel that they are the hunters—not the hunted. . . . It's certainly a mistake for a girl to run after a man, even if encouraged by . . ."

"Oh, Rosie darling," interrupted Margaret, "do you think Otho . . . do you think I have run after Otho, and made him despise me?"

"But, my dear child! . . . You never see him. You don't write to him, do you?" asked Mrs. Maykings.

"No, I have never written to him. . . . Nor he to me. . . . But when I have seen him—four times in six years—I have been awfully nice to him. . . . Jack has asked him to lunch with us. Would he mistake my wanting to show him that everything is just the same between us—and think I meant

anything more? . . . No 'love in a cottage' for me, Rosie-Posie. . . . Would he misunderstand?"

"I don't think so, darling," replied Mrs. Maykings. "He's too nice a boy I should say. . . . Of course, one wants to be extra kind to anyone in his position. . . . But don't overdo it, dear. Even the nicest boys have a good conceit of themselves. Don't give him the idea that you are throwing yourself at his head. He is still a baronet, you know. . . ."

"I won't," promised Margaret. "I'd loathe him to think I was pursuing him, and to feel that he'd got to be nice to me for 'auld lang syne.' . . . No—I'll be sensible—I won't run after him. . . ."

She did not.

A letter from her brother, received next morning, made her look thoughtful, and made Dr. Maykings look more than thoughtful when he read it.

"Dear Muggie," wrote Jack Maykings, "I have got rooms all right, for you and the Governor, at the Randolph—Mitre being full. But I do not think you are coming up to see me win my final! No. I don't think! . . . What do you suppose I have been ass enough to do? Put on weight steadily all this year. I must be still growing. Outwards anyhow—and I can't possibly weigh-in for the Light Heavies!

"The harder I've trained this year, the heavier I've got, and Price says that if I go on jockey-diet I shan't have the strength to live three rounds, even if I get down to the weight again—which he says I shan't. He thinks I shall go steadily on now to 14.7 at least, whatever I do! . . . How's that for luck? And I was considered a cert for the Light-Heavies. There was only one man I feared, Tellis of B.N.C., and he has been sent down—a most infernal piece of impudence on the part of the Dons and a fine sample of unsporting dirty-doggery. I don't know what Oxford's coming to! I believe he only broke a pane of glass or something!

"Well—the point is that I shall have to compete in the Heavies, and there's only one man in that class—and he's good old Otho!

"Of course I beat him once, but he has come on frightfully, and Slogger Price has said that he ought to be a Pro, for he would be Heavy-Weight Champion of the World in a very few years! So it seems a pity that I have either to

stand down altogether or have a whang at Otho. I have used him a bit as sparring-partner at the Gym, when I was training to fight Tellis (as I thought), and I don't mind saying that he gave me the impression that he could hit me when and where he liked, and that I could hit him nowhere at all! An unpleasant feeling.

"Better show this to the Governor. I haven't time to write another letter now. Nor the heart. Hug Mother for me. If you have tears to shed prepare to shed them on Saturday—upon my hopes of a boxing half-blue. Otho will be up here the same years that I shall, and I shall never beat him. This serves me right for inwardly rejoicing when Tellis was sent down. Don't say anything to Mother. Kiss her for me. Fare thee well, sweet Muggie.

"J.

"P.S. I'll have a thundering good shot at Otho—and you never know your luck. If I beat him I shall feel pretty sure of the Amateur Championship of England.

"But I shan't beat him. I haven't a dog's chance. I shall hate letting the Governor down—after his record and all.

"Oh, well,
Oh, hell,
Tout passe
Tout lasse
Tout casse.

"Come in your best bib and tucker. Our old friend Maligni is frightfully keen about you. You ought to be jolly proud if he notices you—he's about the biggest Blood in St. Just's, if not the whole 'Varsity—a most frightful Blood, and I'm jolly lucky to be his friend. I go about with him everywhere. Jolly decent of a Senior man and a Blood like Maligni. He wants to come and stay with us again. Jolly decent of him too."

CHAPTER III

WHO has not looked forward to an event with the most eager and untroubled anticipation, the most impatient longing for its arrival, only to find it a disappointment —if not dust and ashes in the eager, watering mouth? Who has not feared and dreaded the approach of some occasion— which has turned out entirely harmless, if not actually agreeable?

To Otho, the eagerly-anticipated lunch with the Maykings family was a failure, a disappointment, a melancholy occasion.

In the first place he was nervous and self-conscious and felt, rightly or wrongly, that beside the brilliant and wealthy Maligni, the self-assured and merry Vere, and the grave sarcastic Mayne, he was an oafish and uneasy lout. The feeling annoyed him intensely, and thereby, itself increased its cause.

Why should he feel like this, he asked himself. He was as well-bred as any of these others, and of better family. What did it matter to Margaret or to anyone else, that he was poor, shabby, dependent, and outside the circle of Frightful Bloods? Was he becoming as vulgar and ill-bred as Bert Briggs himself, that he should think self-consciously of these things?

But remonstrant self-castigation was of no avail, and he miserably saw himself a tongue-tied and discomfortable creature who must appear lumpish and almost sullen to the others.

In the second place, Margaret was different.

There was no gainsaying the fact that she different. It might be a very difficult matter to say in exactly what way, but that did not alter the fact.

As he entered Jack Maykings' room, her eyes met his, and he went straight across to where she stood at the window, talking to the magnificent Maligni. She flushed slightly as they shook hands, and murmured *"Dear old 'Tho,"* caus-

ing his heart to beat a little quicker; but after that moment she seemed to take no further interest in him, and to be deeply interested in Maligni.

Nor was it as though they had had a quarrel and she was avoiding him. She did not trouble to do that. She merely treated him as an uninteresting stranger whom she had never seen before and whom she was unlikely to see again.

A rebuff would have been more acceptable, downright unkindness preferable—for he could have taxed her with it, and demanded to know the reason.

But it is difficult to accuse a lady of a lack of proper interest in oneself, and of being politely kind but devoid of the due and requisite degree of warmth and admiration. . . .

And in the third place there was a very faintly perceptible flavour, that Otho did not like, about the atmosphere surrounding Margaret's father and brother. Not in the least inimical, but . . . ?

Time after time he told himself that it was entirely imaginary, and that he was a super-sensitive fool, a touchy ill-bred creature always looking for slights and insults.

Of course Dr. Maykings and dear old Jack were as friendly and kind as they had ever been; just the same as they were when he was the heir of Yelver Castle and what remained of the Bellême lands.

And then he would look up from his plate and find Dr. Maykings eyeing him appraisingly, speculatively, with a wary and almost hostile look in his eye. And turning to speak to Jack, he would find, or fancy, a lack of warmth in his voice, and a replica of his father's expression on his face.

It was horrible. . . . Beastly.

Was it that the trail of the Briggses was over it all, and that the Maykings family smelt paint, putty and stale brass when they came near him?

Were Dr. Maykings and Jack afraid that he might presume upon a boyhood friendship and be a nuisance socially? Might they fear that he'd try to establish a *liaison* between the plumber's shop in Tonbury and the charming country-house at Yelverbury?

Of course not! But . . . ?

No—he ought to be ashamed of himself to think such caddish thoughts, and even in his most secret mind to enter-

tain for one moment the idea that these kind people were poor mean snobs.

And yet Margaret was different—and Dr. Maykings and Jack had something on their minds. Something that concerned him.

And suddenly an idea occurred to him, an idea so disturbing that he felt himself blushing.

Could the change in Margaret's manner be something in the nature of a hint? . . . A signification that she was now no longer a child, and that childhood's playmates are not necessarily womanhood's friends? Absolutely apart from anything whatever in the nature of snobbishness, it might well be the view held by Margaret and all her family, that he was not precisely the person with whom intimacy should be encouraged now.

It might be an early, gentle, and kindly-meant hint to him, that Dr. and Mrs. Maykings had "other views" for Margaret; and Margaret and Jack might acquiesce in them.

He glanced at her left hand. No, she was not engaged, apparently, but nevertheless she might well have a tacit understanding with somebody. And who should blame her or her parents, or Jack, for considering that a squire of broad acres, a naval or military officer, any established and gentlemanly person, would be a more suitable intimate for their beautiful Margaret, than a penniless youth of such peculiar position as his own?

It might very well be, that while the Maykings family would never snub nor avoid him, never change toward him because he was poor and *déclassé,* they would, on the other hand, never view with pleasure or tranquillity, the possibility of his being more than a friend.

Quite natural too.

Quite right and proper.

They need not worry, however. Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, under that name or any other—(such as Bob Blame),—had quite sufficient pride, self-respect, and decency to avoid thrusting.

They need have no fear.

Nor need they turn the shoulder of coldness before there was anything to turn it against.

Now he was being caddish again. There was absolutely nothing in the nature of the cold shoulder; they were merely

drawing his attention to the fact that Margaret was now grown-up.

Otho repressed a growing desire to wring the neck of Henry Hoalne, who was sitting on her left, talking fluently of old times, making her laugh, and letting every one know that he and she had grown up together and were very intimate.

It would not have hurt the noble Henry, Otho thought, to include him in the reminiscences, and to remind Margaret of the doings at Yelver Castle as well as of those at the Hoalne and Maykings homes.

It was very obvious that Margaret liked Henry a great deal better now than she had done when he was a boy. And of course, he was quite an eligible aspirant for her society—the son of a Vicar (and very probably the son of a Bishop, before long), and himself to be a Vicar some day.

But of course the magnificent Maligni was an even more dangerous rival—handsome, wealthy, brilliant, gentlemanly, charming, and of distinguished family.

Why should Margaret have a word to throw to an old friend when Maligni the Magnificent was exerting himself to please?

And then Otho laughed at himself, threw off his preoccupation, and did his best to pull his weight in the social boat. Behaving exactly as though he had met Margaret for the first time, and did not expect to meet her again, Otho strove to combine his duty to his host with what he conceived to be his duty to himself—the duty of showing the Maykings family that they certainly had nothing to fear, and that he himself would place all the necessary limitations upon his intercourse with his old play-fellow.

Tragedy is very tragic when one is nineteen.

Opposite to Margaret at table sat a young man of olive complexion, very black hair and moustache, aquiline nose, thickish lips and big arresting black eyes, fringed with lashes of remarkable length and thickness, beneath fine arching black eyebrows. An obvious foreigner.

Mr. Russell—elsewhere Raisul—a cousin and very close friend of Maligni the Magnificent—was visiting him at Oxford, from some place unspecified, as he frequently did.

Scarcely once, throughout the meal, did he take his ardent eyes from Margaret's face, and, hearing that she and her father were staying at the Randolph, immediately transferred himself thither from the Mitre, and watched her with equal intentness at tea and dinner that night, and at breakfast the following morning.

Kaid Raisul Abd'allah Karim had fallen in love.

§ 2

It was a great hour for Dr. Matthias Maykings. His son was going to add lustre to the family name, and honour to his father's reputation.

He was going to carry on the great tradition that his father had—er—borrowed, and show himself a true Maykings, the worthy son of a noble sire.

To whatever extent his own triumphs had been won in imagination, built vainly on the unsubstantial fabric of visions, dream-castles in Spain,—this was genuine enough. His own son was going to step into the ring and fight, not as his father had done, with his mouth, but with his good right hand (and a straight left), for an honourable and distinguished championship, which would put him at once into the ranks of recognised amateurs of the Great Sport. *If* he won it, of course.

And what if that young Otho, his old friend's son, knocked him out in the first minute, or otherwise made his pretensions to championship look ridiculous? He had heard disturbing things about Otho's powers and probabilities. Jack himself said that Otho could eat him.

The worthy doctor shuddered at the thought of a paragraph beginning:

"It is a pity that Mr. Maykings of St. Just's was ever allowed to enter the ring against Mr. Bellême of St. Simeon's and to give such a miserable exhibition of ineptitude as was inflicted upon the large audience gathered in the Drill Hall last night. Mr. Maykings should learn either to box or to fight before . . ."

But that was nonsense. Of course Jack could box and was a well-plucked 'un too. He might not win, but the man who beat him would be uncommonly good . . . and young Otho was good, if all tales were true. . . . But, still, Jack

had certainly beaten him once, in a properly-regulated and professionally-judged contest, at Yelverbury, and he might well hope to beat him again. . . . It had been on points though—and there had been an uneasy feeling that young Otho had had "something up his sleeve" the whole time, and had, so to speak, boxed without fighting, and could have hit far harder than he did.

Anyhow, even if Jack did not win, surely he would put up a good show? . . . But of course he'd win.

Hadn't he had the very best of tuition and training for the last ten years? Wasn't he a splendidly built, plucky, clever boxer, and had he not greatly distinguished himself in the Public Schools Championship bouts?

Had not his name and portrait appeared in several papers and magazines? (They had; and the public had been reminded that the boy was the worthy son of a famous sire, "himself a most distinguished and noted amateur in his day. . . ." The doctor had seen to that.)

Of course Jack would win—and, from what one could gather at Cambridge, he would meet nobody of any distinction in the inter-University Tournament. The likeliest man there, was, in fact, Telfair (Harrow and Trinity Hall), whom Jack had already defeated with ease, with the utmost ease in fact, when they both entered for the Public Schools Championship.

Let Jack beat Otho, and more than the half-blue was his. . . . Public Schools Champion, Oxford Champion and half-blue. . . . Amateur Champion of England. . . . The good doctor dreamed on.

CHAPTER IV

THE big Gymnasium adjoining the Drill Hall of the Oxford University Rifles was crowded to capacity. Around the twenty-four foot Ring, erected in the centre, sat hundreds of pleasurably excited young men, the flower of the youth of Britain.

Among them, more excited, if perhaps less pleasurably, were a few young women, who from time to time, assured themselves that it was as sweet and decorous for them to watch the boxing of their friends and relatives as to watch their rugger, soccer, hockey, rowing, swimming or other athletic contests.

Enthroned on high, sat the referee, once Light-Weight Amateur Champion of England, a gentleman whose tie, socks, suit, locks and much be-medalled watch-chain did not appeal favourably to the critical eyes and narrow tastes of the assembled undergraduates.

On either side of the Ring, upon his left hand and upon his right, sat two judges, one a sporting Don of Christ Church, noted swordsman and boxer; the other, Slogger Price, instructor of boxing in the University Gymnasium.

Beside him sat a huge, bull-necked vast-shouldered man, arrayed in decent broadcloth, whom the Slogger addressed as Joe, and whom a few of the cognoscenti named to their thrilled hearers as the Champion Heavy-Weight of England.

At the corners of the raised Ring, prepared to act as seconds to the young gentlemen in whose training they had assisted, stood men of similar type, armed with towels, sponges, lemons, bowls and bottles of clean water. These lesser stars of the boxing firmament discussed the probabilities of the evening, eyed the Amateur Champion doubtfully, and cast admiring glances, nay, reverent glances, at the Heavy-Weight Champion of England.

Also, alas, since truth must out, they laid small bets, backing their respective fancies.

In the front row of seats along one side of the Ring, sat

some of the evening's candidates for selection as representatives of their University against that of Cambridge; pale-faced young gentlemen in hard condition, one or two dark as to eye, swollen of nose, or slightly thick of lip, honourable evidences of recent strong encounter.

In heavy sweaters and thick overcoats, they sat impassive, nonchalant, their calm exteriors giving no hint of anxieties, excitements or "nerves" that may have seethed beneath the surface. Among them sat Otho and Jack Maykings.

Behind them, in the middle of a row of friends and supporters, sat Doctor Maykings and his daughter Margaret.

Doctor Maykings was causing his daughter some slight concern. Never in her life had she seen her father so perturbed, agitated, nay almost frightened, one might say.

He was undeniably pale; he perspired; the hand which persistently held his large handkerchief, shook; and from time to time he passed the handkerchief across his face. Indeed he almost seemed desirous of concealing his face behind it.

And this he did whenever the eye of the large man, who was seated beside Slogger Price, wandered casually in his direction.

Her father's obvious state of perturbation, Margaret naturally ascribed to anxiety as to the result of his son's appearance before this critical public in the rôle of aspirant to inter-University boxing honours; but she might have seen reason to change her mind could she have heard the agonised whisper wherein the doctor continually murmured to his soul:

"The Heavy-Weight Champion of the British Navy! The Heavy-Weight Champion of the East! . . . Joe Mummery! . . ."

"Jolly rough luck on Maykings that he's got to meet Bellême of St. Simeon's," observed Maligni the Magnificent of the former's College, to his neighbours, Viscount Shannondale and "Mr. Russell." "Lost him his half-blue all right, by all accounts."

"Was he a cert for the Light-Heavies," asked Shannondale.

"Oh, absolute," affirmed the well-informed one. "There was nobody much in the Light-Heavies after Perowne put

his knee out, and Tellis was sent down. . . . It was a walk-over for him. . . . They say Bellême is good enough to challenge the English Champion if he liked to turn Pro. Fancy old St. Simeon's getting a half-blue!"

"Wicked thing sending Tellis down just before the Boxing Tournament," observed Shannondale.

"Ghastly. I don't know what the 'Varsity's coming to, nowadays. Absolutely did him out of his half-blue. He could have destroyed Maykings or anybody else in the Light-Heavies. And he only chucked an orange through some rotten old portrait in Hall . . . Some silly old bishop, or king, or somebody."

"Disgraceful business on the part of the Dons. . . . Sheer spite, probably," and both gentlemen sighed in unison as they contemplated the mean turpitude of unsporting Deans, Dons, Wardens, Principals and Proctors.

"Anyhow it makes another event on the programme," observed Maligni, and added complacently, "let Maykings be butchered to make an Oxford holiday."

"Yea," agreed the Viscount, "and thus will he not have lived in vain."

"He hasn't," asserted Maligni. "He's got the prettiest girl in England for a sister. . . . I'm going to marry her, one of these fine days."

The Referee descended from his throne, climbed into the Ring, majestically ordered silence, and with careful attention to his aitches announced that the proceedings were about to begin, that no smoking would be allowed, that the completest silence would prevail during the rounds, and that he was unshakably assured that the truest and most sporting spirit would prevail. A dead silence ensued and a thousand eyes regarded the gentleman impartially and without enthusiasm.

"And, gentlemen," he shouted in conclusion, "remember there's only one Referee," and struck an attitude.

And into the silence that again fell, a small falsetto voice squeaked:

"And Mahomet is his prophet."

There was a burst of laughter and "Mr. Russell's" haughty face darkened.

It is possible that it dawned upon the mind of the Referee that he had exceeded his duties in instructing his hearers on

the subject of their deportment at their own show in their own Gymnasium.

A small procession filed down the narrow aisle leading from the dressing-rooms, and a pair of undergraduates, followed by their respective seconds, climbed into the Ring, and seated themselves upon the chairs placed for them in their respective corners.

Having announced their names, Colleges, and weights, the Referee bowed gracefully and comprehensively, clambered out of the Ring, resumed his seat of honour, and nodded to the time-keeper, who promptly bawled:

"Seconds out of the Ring!

"Time!"

and set the two young gentlemen in active motion.

§ 2

Otho scarcely saw them as he watched.

What he did see, was himself fighting Jack Maykings—beneath the anguished eyes of his doting father and adoring sister—fighting to prevent him getting the distinction for which he longed—for which, on his son's behalf, that father absolutely yearned.

And of course Jack would have no chance.

He was good, and he could hit hard—but he couldn't hit Otho Bellême.

Otho was as well aware that he could make Jack Maykings look merely silly, as he was that he could knock him out at any moment that he chose to do so.

Many times had he and Jack sparred together in the Gymnasium when the latter was hoping to compete in the Light-Heavy Division and defeat Perowne and Tellis; and every time he had clearly seen how slow Jack was in comparison with himself, how poor a defence he had, how stereotyped a boxer he was, how little he used his brain.

He seemed to have no plan of battle, no strategy or tactics, no mental skill in boxing. He was a mere opportunist, and boxed with his hands instead of his brain. And he used those hands badly, for he relied largely on his left for guarding and on his right for hitting, and one always knew exactly what he was going to do.

But what was Otho going to do? That was the imme-

diate problem. He certainly wasn't going to knock Jack out—in front of his sister and father. . . . (Was it quite fair to bring one's sister, in such circumstances? . . . A matter of opinion, of course. . . .) Well, he couldn't knock him out with Dr. Maykings and Margaret looking on. . . . Margaret, who had been part of Otho's life for ten glorious years. . . . Dr. Maykings who had always been so kind to him, and who had laboured so hard to help his father, his poor, drunken, decadent waster of a father.

Nor could Otho make circles round Jack and show an infinite superiority in speed and skill, causing his old friend to look feeble and foolish as he played with him like a cat with a mouse, and obviously forbore even to hit him hard, much more to knock him out.

Nor, again, could he possibly lose the fight to make Margaret, Dr. Maykings and Jack himself wildly happy.

Personally he didn't care one farthing about winning it—but dear old Joe Mummery did, with all his heart and soul, and it was up to him to consider Joe, first, last, and all the time, in this matter of the Championship and half-blue.

He owed to Joe the very fact of his being at Oxford, and but for Joe he would never have escaped from paint and putty into sport, social comfort, education, and a life worth living. . . . He owed everything to Joe Mummery.

No, he could not afford the luxury of being the sort of tuppenny noble hero only to be found in some wishy-washy schoolboy novel—and give away the fight for love of his opponent's sister! . . . Ghastly tripe! . . . Besides, he was not in love with his opponent's sister. . . . Most certainly not. . . . Neither Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, nor Bob Blame o' Briggses had any desire to intrude where he was not wanted. . . . Oh—rot! She wasn't like that, really.

Anyhow, he had got to win this fight, in common fairness to Joe Mummery, to Slogger Price, to St. Simeon's and to his University.

Yes, he owed it to Oxford to win, in case the Cambridge Heavy-Weight was a good man and could beat Jack Maykings when the inter-'Varsity Boxing and Fencing Tournament was held.

Yes, on all grounds it was up to him to win, and win he most certainly would.

But he must do it with the minimum of humiliation to

Dr. Maykings and Jack, and the minimum of pain and shock to Margaret.

He mustn't make a gory mess of Jack, and he mustn't knock him out. . . . He must just keep ahead of him on points, and let Jack hit him nearly as often as he hit Jack. . . . And Jack should hit him as hard as he liked, without fear of retaliation.

That would be the best way. Just win comfortably on points, for Joe's sake; and not display any great skill or hitting power, for Jack's sake; but win, nevertheless, most obviously and unmistakably, without any shadow of question or doubt.

For Jack's sake or for Margaret's?

Anyhow, once again, he must take care he did win, and not play the noble altruist—at the expense of Joe Mummery.

§ 3

A little later, he found himself sitting in his corner of the Ring and wondering whether he had set himself a particularly difficult task in endeavouring to win a contest by as narrow a margin as was compatible with complete certainty on the part of the judges and referee, that there was a margin, clear and indisputable.

He would have given a good deal to have been fighting a man whom he knew to be a really dangerous opponent—one who would call forth the last ounce of his strength and skill. . . . That would be a much easier and pleasanter business than this of letting Jack Maykings down lightly, at the cost of disappointing Joe Mummery in his exhibition of boxing skill. . . . What he really ought to do, he supposed, was to show publicly how very far he was above undergraduate standards of boxing—as indeed he ought to be, in view of his enormous advantages, in having been for years the pet and pride, the prize pupil, of the finest boxer in England, if not in the world.

Otho looked at Jack.

"Nervous as a cat, poor chap," he thought. "He'll beat himself without any help from me, unless he warms up when he gets going."

He glanced at Dr. Maykings.

"Ten times worse than Jack," he decided. "He's suffering positive agony. . . . White and sweating. . . . I wish I could repay his kindness to me by giving him his heart's desire."

His gaze fell upon Margaret (and the watchful eyes of Joe Mummery followed it).

She gave him the sweetest smile he had ever seen on human face. . . . Otho smiled back at her, trying to do so easily and naturally.

How could he get up and batter her brother to defeat, or make him look a clumsy novice, patently spared and indulged by an amused and pitying superior?

He looked at Joe Mummery as the latter's stony stare turned from Margaret to Otho.

No change of expression altered the wooden face in the slightest degree, but the left eyelid faintly quivered in the suggestion of a wink.

"He knows it's an absolute walk-over for me," thought Otho miserably. . . . "He'll expect me to give a brilliant exhibition of fancy boxing—on the occasion of my first public appearance. . . . Oh damn!"

And then he heard the time-keeper's relentless:

"Seconds out of the Ring!

"Time!"

and rose, walked to the middle of the Ring, shook hands right heartily with Jack, whispered, "Buck up, old chap! Don't be nervous," and fell into position, waiting for Jack to attack.

That would be the best plan, he thought, in order to give his friend confidence, put him at his ease, get him going, and make him do himself justice. He must help Jack to put up some sort of a show.

Keeping his face deliberately smiling, friendly and pleasant, he tried to give Jack the impression, the suggestion, the atmosphere, of a perfectly ordinary round with the gloves, such as they had had a thousand times since the days when they first began to box under the doctor's eye, and were wont to rush upon each other and promptly to topple over and sit down.

Would the ass never begin? Because if he would not, Otho must.

No, Jack seemed paralysed.

He must be knocked out of that condition, and promptly, or it would develop into stage-fright and the utmost ignominy. . . . Poor old Jack.

Otho stepped forward, jerked his right glove in a feint, and led a straight left. . . . Straight but gentle. . . . Also straight on the tip of Jack's nose, jerking his head back, and causing his eyes to water. And, to remind him to guard that all-important spot, Otho permitted his right hand to shoot forward in the same second, with a playful if painful tap upon the "mark," the spot beneath the breast-bone where the ribs divide. . . . That ought to wake Jack up!

It did.

Jack loathed a punch on the nose more than anything, except one on the "mark."

With all his force he smote with his strong right, at Otho's face. Otho's face was not there, however, when the strong right arrived at the spot where it had certainly been when the strong right started forth; and Otho's free hands just registered their freedom from cares of guarding or feinting, by administering a pair of neat, but not gaudy, smacks upon Jack's lower ribs. . . . Jack sprang back, rushed like a bull, passed the spot where Otho had been standing, and received a warming blow on the side of the head as he went by.

Somebody laughed, breaking, with his jeering snigger, the deep silence of the crowded hall.

This would not do at all! . . . This was the very last thing that Otho wanted to happen, the introduction of the idea that Jack was ridiculously out-classed. . . . Anyhow, he had got Jack going at last.

"Come on, Jack," he whispered without moving his lips, and Jack came on, hitting wildly, forgetting to guard, forgetting all he had ever learnt. . . . It was very difficult to help him. . . . Very difficult for a boxer whose arms guarded instinctively and unconsciously, whose fists did the right things at the right moment, apparently of their own volition. . . . Very difficult indeed.

Poor Jack had not hit him yet, and although he had not once hit Jack hard, so as to hurt or distress him, Otho knew that the points must be piling up terribly against his opponent . . . against Dr. Maykings' son . . . against Margaret's brother . . . against the friend of his boyhood's happy days, his only happy days probably. The days when . . .

Bang!

Oh splendid! Jack had brought off a real good 'un. . . . Nearly floored him! . . . He must have been wool-gathering.

"Good old Jack," he smiled, as there was a burst of applause from the St. Just's contingent, and even the ranks of St. Simeon's could scarce forbear to cheer. . . . The losing man had had a bit of luck and everybody was glad.

Otho was delighted. So much so, that, when Jack rushed again and missed, he forbore to smite; when he led a straight left, he forbore to cross-counter; when he ducked clumsily below Otho's left, Otho forbore to knock him out with his right; and when he fell against Otho in an attempted clinch, he forbore to pummel his ribs with the in-fighter's cruel short-arm stabs—of which he was a master.

So that at the end of the first round, none but the experienced were aware that this manifestation of the Great Game was a game indeed, in which one player played merrily with the other, and chiefly exercised his skill in covering his opponent's lack of it.

On the call of *"Time!"*, Otho went to his chair, lay back, and panted rather more distressfully than was strictly necessary.

"What's he up to?" inquired Joe Mummery of Slogger Price.

"Givin' 'is pal a run for 'is money, o' course," replied that puzzled gentleman.

"Oh, I didn't know it was a runnin' game," was the reply. "And I didn't know that his pal had given him any money. I just thought p'raps they'd got up there to box, or something like that."

"Mr. Blame knows what 'e's doin' of," said Mr. Price shortly.

"Yes. . . . I wish *I* knew what Mr. Blame's doing," answered his friend.

Both were anxious, disappointed, worried.

"'E'll knock that poor feller through the ropes when 'e's done playin' with 'im," announced the Slogger.

"Well—I hope he won't leave it too late," was the gruff reply. "The Referee an' Judges 'll be going home by an' bye. . . . I can't say that he seems to me to have improved

beyond all reckernition in your hands, Slogger Price. . . . And he's givin' his pal a run for his money, is he?"

A heavy bull-necked youth wearing grey flannel trousers, gymnasium shoes and a few sweaters, passed on his way to procure bottles of fresh water.

"Here," said Joe, as the young man went by, "half a mo', mate. When you go back to that corner, give Joe Mummery's compliments to Mr. Blame, an' say he sincerely hopes Mr. Blame won't do himself any harm, and above all that he won't hurt his oppersight number. . . . Won't be rough with him like. . . . Not hit him, for example, nor anything like that."

The lad grinned.

"Very good, Mr. Mummery, Sir," he said. "Mr. Blame is playing a bit light."

"Playin' pattin' butter, I sh'd think," growled Joe.

"Got somethink up 'is sleeve though, o' course," affirmed the boxer as he passed on.

"About time he brought it down then," grumbled the puzzled Champion of England, as he stared at his protégé whom he had expected to astonish the Fancy with a most brilliant exhibition of the cleverest, swiftest, deadliest boxing that their astounded eyes had ever seen.

This kind of average tripe could be watched any evening, by those who had the time to waste, at any suburban or provincial amateur boxing-club in England. . . . Why, at the Blackfriars Ring or the Whitechapel Wonderland they'd have had orange-peel chucked at them and been told to go 'ome and mind the biby.

And Joe Mummery leaned back in his chair and stared hard at a bloke oppersight. . . . A bloke whose silly face seemed familiar, somehow. A bloke with a beautiful girl in a red hat. . . . The girl who had smiled at young Bob. . . . Where had he seen that bloke before?

Dr. Maykings stooped down and hid his face completely.

Otho received the message and smiled uneasily. . . . Had it been as obvious as all that? . . . If so, he hadn't succeeded in his object of letting Jack and his father have the satisfaction of thinking it had been a near thing, and that Jack had put up a splendid and almost successful fight. . . .

On the other hand, though it were impossible to deceive Joe and the other professionals, he was probably deceiving everybody else.

No doubt they were all saying that Maykings was doing splendidly, and that it was "anybody's fight" so far.

He was certainly deceiving some, surprising others, and puzzling many.

"What d'you make of that?" asked Vere of Mayne.

"Nothing," was the reply. "If I didn't know better, I should think one of two things: either that Bellême was one of those people who are everything in the Gym and nothing in the Ring, or else that he had simply sold the fight to Maykings. . . . But what I know of Bellême contradicts both theories absolutely."

"H'm. . . . We'll suspend judgment," observed Vere. "There are two rounds to go yet, and Bellême may merely be allowing Maykings to go them."

"Why should he?" said Mayne.

"Ask me another," was the reply. . . . "But I've certainly never seen Bellême so slow, careless and feeble, when he was sparring in the Gym."

Near them, Palgrave and Mellor exchanged opinions upon the performances of their acquaintances.

"I tell you what it is, Tommy Mellor," said Palgrave, "our young friend Bellême is a fraud, and Jackie Maykings is going to win this bloodless victory."

"Sort of thing you would tell me," admitted Mellor. "Why, my good ass, Bellême would win if you now went and tied one of his hands behind his back. . . . Either hand you like. . . . Bellême's a boxer, my good tick. . . . He's also a fighter. . . . And he could do Maykings and you as well, if you had the pluck to chip in and join Maykings for the rest of the fight."

Palgrave laughed merrily.

"I'll let one ray of light into the darkness of the hole where your mind ought to be," he said. "And that's this. Jackie Maykings has brought off the only sound punch that's been landed so far, and don't you forget it! . . . He has blooming well hit Bellême, anyhow."

"Oh, cease and desist thy prating, Pimple," was the reply. "I was talking about boxing."

"Well, stop talking about what you don't understand," urged Palgrave. "Bellême's a fraud, and I'm jolly glad I haven't got anything on him."

§ 4

"Seconds out of the Ring!

"Time!" called the time-keeper, and Otho rose and walked to the centre of the Ring.

With his mind still engaged upon his problem, he extended both hands for the boxers' double-handed "shake" of goodwill and sportsmanship, that precedes the first and last rounds of a contest.

This was neither the first nor the last round, and the shaking of hands was superfluous and unusual.

Intent on nothing but victory, Jack Maykings put all his strength into a mighty right-handed blow at the point of the jaw of the unready Otho, knocking him down in most decisive fashion.

The time-keeper rose to his feet.

"One . . . Two . . . Three . . ." he counted, and Otho sprang to his feet, smiling.

"Splendid," he whispered, under cover of one or two cries of:

"Shame!", "Foul poke!", "Not at all!", and *"Quite fair!",* and a buzz of discussion as to whether Maykings had not taken a strictly lawful but most ungentlemanly advantage of Otho's mistaken and foolish action.

"Oh! He wasn't ready!" cried Margaret to her father.

"Then he ought to have been," replied that gentleman. "Perfectly legitimate. . . . He ought to know how to stand, by this time."

Tremendously encouraged by his success, Jack Maykings took the aggressive, attacked furiously, and rained blows upon Otho's guard or upon the place where Otho's head had been when the blow was aimed. Unintentionally, during this whirlwind attack, Otho gave a very remarkable exhibition of guarding, ducking and dodging, causing the gloomy faces of Messrs. Price and Mummery faintly to lighten up, and the whole assembly to give a brief spontaneous round of applause.

And, at the end of it, Jack Maykings was weary and Otho was untouched.

"Now show us a bit o' boxing, an' then put him to sleep," growled Joe Mummery softly.

"Yus," observed Slogger Price, "'e'll play with 'im for a hit now, and then 'it 'im through the ropes."

But Otho did nothing of the kind. He allowed Jack to get his breath and recover his strength, and then boxed him, simply, lightly, and straightforwardly, without feints, tricks, or any attempts to hurt or distress.

On the call of *"Time,"* at the end of the second round, Jack Maykings was unmarked, while Otho was bleeding freely from a cracked lip.

"Who's being butchered to make an Oxford holiday now?" inquired Viscount Shannondale of Maligni the Magnificent, as the combatants walked to the chairs hastily placed in their respective corners.

"Weird do, isn't it?" replied Maligni. "Can't make it out. . . . I feel most frightfully sick that I didn't enter against Bellême myself. I could lick Maykings in thirteen and one-third seconds, and apparently Maykings can lick Bellême. Therefore much more so could I. . . . Q.E.D. as jolly old Euclid saith—or so I'm told. . . ."

"Told what?" inquired Shannondale, who was a very honourable, very fine, and very stupid English gentleman.

"That Euclid saith."

"Saith what?"

"Q.E.D."

"Don't know what you're talking about," said Shannondale. "My father has a horse called *P.D.Q.* which means *Pretty Damn Quick*—that's going to win the Grand National, and I'm going to ride him."

"What's that got to do with it?" inquired Maligni.

"With what?" asked his friend.

"With anything," replied Maligni.

"Don't know what you're talking about," stated Shannondale.

"I'm sure you don't, Shanner," agreed Maligni. "Give your brain a rest while I tell you that we're watching a weird do. . . . Bellême's playing a deep game I believe. . . . Mysterious business. . . . Wheels within wheels, and then some more wheels."

"Where?" inquired the noble Viscount.

"In this mysterious business."

"What business? Don't know what you're talking about."

"Who accused you?" inquired Maligni.

"Mr. Russell" laughed at his cousin's wit and humour.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Mayne was asking of Vere.

"Less than ever," replied Vere. "Because what is obvious is impossible."

"That Maykings has squared Bellême?"

"He may be seedy. . . . Off his oats. . . ."

"Perhaps he's going to be a Thundering Death Angel and Lightning Destroyer, in the last act," hazarded Mayne.

"I hope not," said Vere. "I hate that showy tricky sort of stuff, in amateur work. . . . Ungentlemanly. . . . Not the clean potato. . . . Dirty brass."

"Oh, rot," replied his friend with sweet reasonableness.

"Any remarks, Mr. Tommy Mellor?" inquired Palgrave of his friend.

"None that your intelligence would appreciate," was the reply, "any more than it can appreciate that Bellême is playing with Maykings. . . . Simply playing prettily and gently with his young friend. . . . In the third round it will be his painful duty to knock him out. . . . He will dissemble his love and knock him through the ropes. . . . But all in the way of kindness. . . . He will painlessly extract him—from the ring."

"Oh, shut up," requested Palgrave. "Shut up and talk sense for once. Just positively for one night only."

"I tell you Bellême is playing with Maykings."

"Then he's doing it while Maykings gives him a damn good hiding," asseverated Palgrave.

Mellor gazed upon the face of his friend.

"You don't look such a fool as you are, you know," he affirmed. "I suppose you couldn't."

Palgrave examined the countenance of Mellor.

"I must say I have seen many a village idiot with a face no sillier than yours," he replied. "P'raps they couldn't manage it."

"Who is winning, Dad?" whispered white-faced Margaret.

"Jack," replied the doctor.

"Wouldn't you like to go and say a word to him?" she asked.

Doctor Maykings glanced at Joe Mummery.

"No, dear," he decided. "Might make him self-conscious. . . . Distract him, you know."

"I'd love to go and whisper a word of—er—sympathy and condolence—to Otho," Margaret admitted.

"No, no!" said the Doctor. "Rather conspicuous, you know. . . . A lady. . . ."

Joe Mummery was staring hard, and the good Doctor broke his sentence with a sneeze into his large handkerchief, the which he continued to hold well in front of his face, as though expecting another violent nasal explosion.

§ 5

"Seconds out of the Ring!

"Time!" called the time-keeper, for the third and last round. Otho and Jack Maykings rose and walked to the middle of the Ring, where they shook hands in hearty friendship and goodwill, each firmly under the impression that the fight was his.

Jack Maykings held the belief that he must now use his strength, rush Otho out of his boxing finesse, and win by sheer fighting.

Had he not brought off the only notable punch of the first round? Had he not floored his opponent in the second, achieving the only knock-down blow of the fight? Was he not unmarked and quite fresh, while his opponent bore blood-stains on his white zephyr and had an obviously split and swollen lip?

He rushed upon Otho, driving furiously with a straight left which barely brushed his friend's ear, and putting forth a mighty upper-cut that cut nothing but air. At the same time, Otho ducked and smacked his friend playfully on the jaw, and as he jerked his own head back to avoid the said upper-cut, he smote him gently on the mark.

Jack grunted painfully, and, to give him time to recover, and to keep him from wasting his strength in terrific and futile blows that did but beat the air, Otho played a tune upon his friend's face and body.

His hands seemed to move as swiftly as the sticks of a kettle-drummer . . . left-right; left-right—left; left-right-right; and left-right-right-left-left-right-left. . . .

There was a burst of clapping, a chorus of shouts of approval, and some laughter. Otho stopped. He was defeating his own object. Instead of improving Jack's chances by preventing him from wasting his ebbing strength, he was decreasing them by making him look absurd—by playing with him in fact. For Jack had not stopped a single blow. They had rained upon him in an unbroken tattoo which was almost rhythmical. Had there been any force in them the fight would have ended. As it was, Jack was almost unhurt —physically.

Mentally, he was very hurt indeed.

He was enraged.

He felt like a bull in the hands of a mocking matador whose skill defeats the beast's mighty strength with graceful ease, the ease of perfect style.

As Otho stepped back, Jack rushed again and drove at his face as though he were trying to smash a hole in a brick wall. Otho's head leant to one side and the blow missed it, and Jack found that he had run his mark against Otho's right.

Left and right his arms shot out like piston-rods, and, like piston-rods returned without striking a blow; while those of Otho, like steam-hammers, struck with just the amount of force their operator desired.

Again there was laughter, irrepressible laughter at the boxer who could not touch the man who stood in front of him, the man who seemed rather to conjure with his own head, than to dodge and duck.

Like the elusive pea which is never beneath the delusive thimble, the head was never where its earnest seeker expected to find it—with his fist.

The laughter annoyed and troubled Otho. . . . He must give Jack a chance again. . . . He did not want a "decisive verdict," gained by making his poor friend the laughing stock of the spectators.

Yes—he must let him pile up some points; retrieve his position; lose by a moderate margin. . . .

How this laughter must torture Dr. Maykings and Margaret.

It must stop.

Jack gathered all his strength and swung two terrific blows at Otho—left—right, missing him entirely, the left brushing his right ear, the right brushing his left. . . .

A loud guffaw burst from the deep chest of Palgrave. Otho angrily turned his head towards the spot whence came this unseemly ribald ridicule of his friend—and his friend promptly and legitimately struck him with all his strength, a thoroughly well-delivered, well-placed, well-timed blow that sent Otho heavily against the ropes—whence his body sagged to the floor of the ring.

Mr. Joseph Mummery so far forgot himself and his good manners as to spit on the ground.

"One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four . . ." counted the time-keeper, rising to his feet and working his right arm up and down as though operating a pump-handle—and Otho rolled over and raised himself on his hands and knees.

"Five . . . Six . . . Seven . . ."

And Otho crouched on his feet, one hand touching the floor.

"Eight . . ."

Then Otho rose slowly and, as Jack rushed upon him, knocked that astounded gentleman across the corner of the ring and through the ropes—what time a tremendous cheer burst forth from every corner of the hall.

"Time!" called the time-keeper at the same moment, and Otho went and seated himself in his chair, his mind disturbed with a horrid fear lest he had hurt Jack, his conscience reproaching him violently for his ruffianly brutality, as Jack climbed slowly back into the ring.

Surely there had been no need to hit him as hard as that. . . . Scarcely the way to make Jack lose, by a narrow margin. . . . What must Margaret and Dr. Maykings be feeling? . . .

§ 6

Slogger Price, in his capacity of judge, wrote on a slip of paper the name of the winner—the name of the man who seemed to him to have made most points.

The sporting Don of Christ Church wrote on his paper the name of the man who, in his opinion, had made the better show.

These two gentlemen took their papers to the Referee, who glanced at them and placed them in his pocket. He then consulted the notebook in which he had kept his score of the points.

He rose to his feet.

In the perfect silence that ensued, he uttered the words: *"Mr. Maykings of St. Just's wins,"* and, when the howl of applause, uttered by all good St. Just's men, had subsided, a hubbub of comment, argument, and almost violent discussion filled the air.

Joe Mummery rose from his seat as Otho sprang up and ran across the ring to shake the hand of his conqueror and to offer his heartiest and sincerest congratulations—while his soul soared high for Margaret's and Doctor Maykings' sakes, and then sank abysmally for Joe's.

Mummery approached the corner of the ring where Jack and Otho stood, and near to which Doctor Maykings sat.

Without a word, that gentleman bounded from his seat and fled from the hall.

"The strain has been too much for Father," thought Margaret, as she rose to follow him.

It had—for the face of Joe Mummery had been truly unpleasant to behold.

"I'll see you outside, Mr. Blooming Blame," growled Mummery, and departed from that unhallowed spot, the scene of the downfall of his highest hopes: a bitter, disillusioned, disappointed man.

Mary's boy—to do a thing like that; to sell a fight, like some dirty tenth-rate nigger boxer in a Bowery joint; like some swindling yellow-faced ring-side rough of a Dago bruiser in a low-class dock-side shed in a South American port.

Mary's boy!

Or could it possibly be that he was one of these temperamential blokes that can box like wonders—and can't fight at all? One of these poor fellows who're marvels in the Gymnasium and not worth their shoe-leather in the ring?

Either way it was blind Hell.

Blind? . . . Yes. . . . He'd go and drink himself blind. . . . No, he wouldn't. . . . He'd take this blow like he'd taken all the blows of his life—with his head up.

Young Bob! . . . Mary's boy! . . .
That Blarsted Baronite of a Sir Mangle-Blame!
"Blood tells!" . . . Specially if it's bad blood. . . . Well, that was the end of young Bob Blame, anyhow.

CHAPTER V

MUFFLED against the cold, Otho stepped out of the brilliantly lighted Gymnasium, into the darkness of Alfred Street, and turned to the right, to go up into the High.

Under the big lamp, outside the Drill-Hall door, a burly figure stood motionless.

"Hullo, Joe—I'm most awfully sorry," began Otho.

"Excuse me asking the inquisitive question, Mr. Blooming Blame," interrupted a gentle and insinuating voice, "but might I ask how much you got for losing that fight? . . . I've got no right to ask, I know, and it's only idle curiosity like—but I would be glad to hear what it was worth. . . . It'd give me some idea of what figure you put on my teaching and help and—well—friendship, like. . . . See? . . . I only wanted to know if it brought you in a satisfactory sum, like. . . . See?"

Otho recoiled in horror.

"Joe!" he cried. "What on earth do you mean? You don't suggest I'd sell a fight, do you? You don't think I'd let you down and disappoint you for money—or for anything else? . . . Good God!"

"I wouldn't have thought it an hour ago, Bob Blame—and I'd have knocked the lying mouth off anybody who suggested such a horrible thing. . . . But I've got eyes in me head, haven't I? . . . I do know a little about boxin', don't I? And I say you delibritly lost that fight on purpose. Either that, or else you're not worth your blooming salt! Either you gave that fight away—or else any fifteen-year-old seven-stone stable-boy could thrash you in one round."

"Joe!"

"Well—which is it? Are you a double-crossin' fight-sellin' swindlin' hound—or are you a poor herrin'-gutted cur that any half-baked ammercher 'gentleman-novice' could wipe the floor with?"

"I didn't mean to lose the fight, Joe."

"You didn't sell it for money, then?"

"No. That sort of thing is not done here."

"Did you sell it for anything else than money, then?"

"What do you mean, Joe?"

"What I say. Are you and this Maykings lad after the same girl—the girl you was lookin' at—an' you to have 'er if he wins the fight?"

"No. That sort of thing is not done here, either. . . . Can't you understand that this is one of the homes of clean sport? . . . A place where anything but the most perfect straightness and fair-dealing is utterly unthought of, and impossible?"

"Oh, is that so? . . . Right! . . . Then would you be so very kind and condescendin' as to tell a plain man the plain tale of this bit o' fair-dealin'—for if you didn't give that fight away and lose on purpose—there never was a fight ever given away in this world! . . . *'Fair-dealin'!'* " and Joe Mummery spat.

"I'll try and tell you, Joe. . . . I was not doing my best," said Otho miserably.

"Ho!" interrupted Mummery. "You wasn't, wasn't you? And why—with all this *'perfect straightness an' fair-dealin','* might I ask?"

"I didn't want to win so easily as to make the other man look a fool. . . . I didn't want to knock him out. . . . For my own sake I didn't even really want to win. . . . For your sake I did want to win—but by not too big a margin, and I did my very utmost to bring it off like that, Joe."

"And why, once again, Bob Blame? . . . Why was you to be so bloomin' tender with the poor young gentleman—who put you down for a count of eight?"

"His father and sister were there," began Otho miserably.

"Ho! Now we're gettin' down to it!" Mummery broke in. " *'His sister was there,'* was she? . . . The lass in the red hat—who smiled to you and you to her! . . . Ho, yes! . . . And I wasn't there, I s'pose? . . . Me, who trained you for years, spent my time and money on you, swore to make you Champion o' the World, and made a blinkin' silly fool of myself tellin' all the big men of the Fancy that I'd got a real White Hope comin' on. . . . No—*'his sister was there'* . . . and so you gave him the fight."

"Joe—I didn't mean to. Believe me, Joe, I never for one

moment meant to let him win. . . . I only wanted . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake shut your lyin' tripe-trap," growled Mummery. "Come off it—before I hit you meself—you miserable half-baked imitation of a boxer. . . . I can hardly keep my hands off you—you sneakin', pimpin', mincin' fine gentleman of a parlour-fight-faker! . . . *'His sister was there, so I didn't hardly like to hit him, Joe,'* " mimicked the incensed and cruelly disappointed Champion.

"Joe! This is ghastly! . . . I tell you I didn't mean to lose the fight. I was sure I was winning, on points—and I wanted to let him off lightly. . . . We grew up together, and his father was most awfully good to me and to my father too."

"And his sister?" hissed Mummery, with a mocking ferocity. "She *'most awfully good to you'* too? . . . I tell you I can hardly keep my hands off you. . . . You tempera-mental pimp."

"Don't," said Otho sharply.

"Don't what?"

"Don't keep your hands off me. I'll fight you here and now. Or I'll fight you anywhere and any when you like. . . . And I won't lose that fight intentionally, anyhow!"

Joe Mummery gave a contemptuous bark, spat, and turned on his heel, departing to his lodging at the house of Slogger Price, without a word of reply or farewell.

Otho sauntered to his "digs," one of the most wretchedly unhappy young men in England.

He had mortally wounded the warm, living affection of dear Joe Mummery. . . . Disappointed and offended him beyond hope of forgiveness.

And as he cast himself down in the arm-chair that did not adorn his sitting-room, he realised that he neither could, nor would, take another penny from Joe Mummery, that he was ruined, that his brief career as an Oxford undergraduate and a "gentleman" was over, his period of emancipation ended. . . . To-morrow he must return to Tonbury, and, from being Bellême of St. Simeon's, become Bob Blame o' Briggses once again.

Twelve o'clock striking. . . . He knew how Cinderella must have felt when the clock struck twelve. . . . And yet, afar off, across immeasurable spaces of gloom, there shone a small light, a gleam of brightness in the thought that the

measure of his misery was also the measure of the joy that must now fill the hearts of Jack, Dr. Maykings, and Margaret.

Dear distant Margaret, smiling kindly from the other side of a great social gulf.

He fell asleep thinking of days at Yelver Castle—Big Attic—the Swiss Chalet . . . Margaret . . .

CHAPTER VI

OTHO awoke to find himself stiff, cold, and very empty, huddled in his uncomfortable arm-chair with his head at such an angle, and so apparently fixed, that he postponed the effort to straighten his aching neck.

"Fire out. . . . Luck out. . . . Lamp going out. . . . Follow their example."

He slowly rose, yawned hugely and shook himself like a dog. The clock struck one.

"Does the rotten thing mean twelve-thirty, one o'clock, or one-thirty?"

The hands pointed to two-twenty.

Otho consulted his watch, which had stopped at seven-fifteen.

"Morning or evening?" he inquired of its unresponsive face.

Considerate ever, he removed his heavy shoes before creeping upstairs in the pitchy darkness.

As he groped silently for the handle of his bedroom door, he heard a sound that affected him profoundly.

It was that of a cry which was not so much a cry as a wailing moan.

"Jacker having a nightmare? . . . Sounds more like Rachael weeping for her children, or Mrs. Thynne mourning her lost youth and innocence."

The sound came again—alarming in its intensity of pain, grief and misery; a disturbing sound to hear at that hour of the dark night and in the stillness of that silent house. . . . This was beyond a joke. . . . Ghastly.

Otho turned and crept up the next flight of stairs to the landing,—territory hitherto unknown.

From under the ill-fitting door of one of the rooms shone a light, and from the room came the sound of passionate and despairful sobbing . . . a cry. . . .

He hesitated for a moment, then, opening the door quietly,

he beheld Victoria sitting up in bed, her face crushed against her knees, her arms twined round her head, her whole body convulsed and shaken.

"What's up?" he asked, gazing round the room.

Either because her ears were covered or because she was too distraught, the girl did not hear him. . . . On the poor bed, beside her, was a plate containing half a slice of stale toast, one or two crusts, and a small mass of what looked like bloater-paste, or some such condiment. The toast and crusts were thickly spread with this unattractive relish. Beside the guttering candle on the rickety wash-stand was the tin from which the paste had been extracted, evidently by means of the handle of the toothbrush that lay beside it.

Did Mrs. Thynne starve the girl, and was this a midnight orgy of horrible scraps? She had never looked starved, nor even hungry. . . . Far from it. . . . Was she ill? . . .

The girl threw out her hands in unconsciously dramatic gesture.

". . . I can't," she groaned.

"What's up, Victoria?" Otho asked again, and turning, the girl presented to his alarmed gaze a tear-stained visage. The boy was inexpressibly shocked at the disfiguring change in the beautiful face of the bright and smiling little Victoria.

"Are you ill?" he asked. "I'll fetch Mrs. Thynne at once. Don't be . . ."

"Oh, I can't eat it," she moaned.

"Well! Don't then," said Otho. "Are you hungry? Ill?"

"Hungry!" she laughed hysterically. . . . "It's poison!"

"What?"

"It's rat-poison," sobbed Victoria. "I was going to poison myself."

"Good God!" said the shocked and horrified Otho.

"And now I can't eat it," moaned the girl. . . . "Oh, what will become of me? What will become of me?" and she threw herself back on the pillow, shaking from head to foot.

Otho pulled himself together.

"Here—tell me, quick," he said. "Have you swallowed any of that stuff?"

"No. . . . I tried to . . . and . . . I can't. . . . I can't. . . . I'm frightened. . . . I tried to jump into the river tonight—and I was frightened. . . . I'll be sent to prison if I don't manage to kill myself. . . . All my family does it.

. . . My father cut my mother's throat, and then he hung himself, he did."

"Sure you haven't swallowed any of the rat-poison?"

"No . . . No . . . No. . . . I wish I . . ."

Otho thanked God for that, and in the revulsion of his relief from this fear and horror, took her hand, dropped it promptly and smiled. . . . Evidently the girl had a pre-natal tendency to suicide. . . . He said aloud:

"No, of course not—you aren't a rat, you know, Victoria. . . . Quite the wrong diet for you. . . . Look here—I'm going to take the beastly muck away, and you're going to promise me that you'll never, never . . ."

"No, never! . . . I can't. . . . I must find some other way . . ." sobbed the girl. "A train or a gas-stove. . . . Or jump out of the window. . . . But I'm frightened when it comes to it. . . . Oh, I haven't got a friend in the world . . . " and again she was shaken from head to foot with convulsive sobs.

"Don't talk such piffling rot," said Otho sharply, and, rising, took the plate and tin of rat-poison, and put them outside the door.

"Now look here," he said, returning, "tell me all about it, and we'll put it all straight I'll be your friend, Victoria —and you can trust me. . . . Of course you'll go to prison if you're caught trying to commit suicide. It's murder, you know—self-murder."

"I'm going to commit suicide, I tell you," moaned the girl. . . . "I can't do nothing else. . . . Oh, if only I hadn't been so wicked. . . . I was tempted. . . . Oh, I was that tempted I couldn't help it. . . ."

So that was it, was it?

"Victoria, look here," he said earnestly, "swear you won't do yourself any harm and I swear I'll get you out of this mess. . . . You can trust me, my child."

Victoria sat up and raised her twisted face to the dirty ceiling. "I swear to God I'll kill meself to-morrow," she said solemnly, "and I won't be a coward again. . . . I'll put me 'ead under a train. . . . Or jump in the river when the sun's shining. . . . I can't do it at night. . . . It looks so awful."

Otho took her by the shoulder and shook her.

"Don't talk such rot," he growled. "Have you been read-

ing penny novelettes? . . . You're talking like a cheap fool, Victoria. . . . Be a man! . . . I mean a woman! . . . Would you rather die miserably and horribly—or live happily? . . . I tell you I'll look after you . . . I'll save you, all right. Now promise—and then hear the promise I'll make!"

"Promise!" sneered the girl, raising her contorted face from her knees. "Save me? You! . . . Have you got any money? . . . P'raps you'll save me from prison if I promise? . . . Now you know, an' if you want to help me, help me to kill meself . . ." and she burst into a torrent of tears.

Otho wondered how best to cope with the distraught girl.

"There! . . . There! . . . There! . . ." he murmured, seating himself on the side of the bed, infinite pity in his heart, a pity beneath which was a substratum of hard, cold, dangerous wrath against the brute that had brought this bright and happy child to despair and suicide.

Thus they sat, the boy stroking the girl's hand with soothing rhythmical movement, and repeating with gentle insistence that he would befriend her, help her . . . until the heavy shuddering sobs became less violent, less frequent.

What was to be done? He had made her trouble his, now; and he had given his word that he would help her. . . . The first thing to save would be her life. . . . Get her to abandon this suicide-obsession. Then save her from ruin and despair.

"I will too," he swore to himself. "I'll save her, all right. (*I Saye and I Doe.*) . . . She's getting quieter—going to sleep, I do believe."

Would it be safe to leave her, if she fell asleep, or would she do something desperate on waking? Throw herself out of the window, or cut her throat with a blunt kitchen knife?

He was getting very cold and stiff.

Victoria was asleep.

Should he gently lay her down on the pillow and creep away—or ought he to stay in the room to see that she did not do herself an injury when she awoke?

Rat-poison spread like butter on a slice of stale toast!

The poor pitiful child! . . .

Yawn . . . Nod . . . Yawn . . . Nod. . . .

Hullo!—going to sleep. . . . This won't do. . . . What

will do? . . . What about calling Mrs. Thynne and making her responsible for seeing that no harm came to Victoria?

Yes, and what would Mrs. Thynne do? Sling her out into the street—with nowhere to go. Nowhere but the river. The immaculate Mrs. Thynne wouldn't have her house contaminated by the presence of a sinner, for an hour. . . . A "fellow-sinner." . . . Weren't we all sinners? And most of us damned hypocrites as well? . . . Holy church-going Mrs. Thynne and her odour of sanctity-and-whisky! . . .

What to do? . . . Beastly cold: arm going dead: stiff all over: mortal sleepy. . . . Hullo!—the wretched candle going out!

Otho endeavoured to withdraw his numbed arm, and to lay the girl gently down. . . . Splendid! . . . She'd sleep till morning. . . . And then what? . . . It would be cowardice to sneak off and leave her alone. . . . What should . . .

With a scream the girl sprang up, stared wildly round, and clutched at him violently as he turned to her.

"Hush! Hush!" he said. "It's all right, Victoria. I'm here. I'll look after you."

"Oh, kill me, kill me," sobbed the girl. "Oh, why did you take the poison away? . . . Where is it? . . . I could . . ."

Otho put his hand over her mouth.

"Hush!" he said again. "I tell you I'll save you, Victoria. Look here—listen! . . . Who is it, Victoria?"

"Why! 'Ow did you know about it?" she answered, and then burst into fresh sobs.

"I don't know," she wailed a minute later, in answer to his repeated question, "and I wouldn't say if I did. . . . Don't ask me nothing or I'll kill myself now. . . . I'll strangle meself."

"You don't know?" said Otho, shocked and astounded. "Victoria! You don't know?"

What on earth could she mean? . . . This bright innocent-looking little Victoria!

"I only know his initials," sobbed the girl.

"And what are they?" asked Otho.

"Shan't tell," was the reply. "Never! Never! Never! I won't."

Best to leave it at that, for the present, thought Otho. No sense in driving her more desperate by questioning. But how could he help her if he didn't know?

She really must tell him that much—or what could he do to help her out of her trouble?

"Who is it?" asked Otho again. "Tell me, my dear, and I'll see that all's well. . . ."

"Shan't tell. . . . I'll never tell."

"Then how can I help you?"

"You can't. . . . Unless you can get me out of Oxford. . . . Nobody can. . . . It's too late now. . . . And I'll be dead to-morrow. . . ." And she began to cry again.

Otho took the girl's hand and tried to comfort her.

"I tell you I'll help you," he insisted in a kind of shouted whisper. "You tell me who . . ."

"Gimme that poison quick an' stop here while I eat it. . . . That'll be real helping me."

"I'll help you better than that, Victoria," Otho promised.

"How?" stuttered Victoria. "How can you? You can't even get me out of Oxford. . . . An' if you did, I haven't got anywhere to go. . . . I tell you I will . . ."

"No, no, no, Victoria. Listen to me. . . ."

Otho thought desperately for a few seconds. He was leaving Oxford the next day. . . . This girl was much of the same class as the Briggs family. . . . He would get his mother to provide a temporary refuge for her, and he could get further information from Victoria when she was calmer. "I'll help you to leave Oxford," he soothed. "Promise to do yourself no harm and I promise I'll save you. . . . Why, my mother would just—just—love to help you, Victoria," and he tried to laugh as the guttering candlewick expired, its glowing end sending forth an evil smell and a thick greasy smoke.

Darkness.

The girl lay silent, her sobs decreasing, her body ceasing to tremble, her breathing growing natural.

Silence. Neither spoke nor moved.

The door opened, and Mrs. Thynne, candle in hand, gazed incredulous upon the scene.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. THYNNE stared, the expression of her face changing from blank incredulous surprise to comprehension, disgust and wrath.

Malevolence in a night-gown and curl-papers.

Otho thought of Medusa of the Snaky Locks. . . . An excellent study for the Gorgon's head. . . . Yes. Some of the curl-papers achieved quite an ophidian effect and suggestion, varying from head-raised indignation and anger, to a horror that overwhelmed them, leaving them limp and collapsed.

The highest one, a simulated cobra, about to strike. . . . The central one prone upon her forehead, a shocked slow-worm, moribund, resigned. Others writhing in anguish.

He gazed upon the dædal crown of Mrs. Thynne and awaited what would come.

A ghastly silence.

"HO!" said Mrs. Thynne with explosive suddenness.

"Two HOes, or HO twice," replied Otho. . . . "Your move, Madame."

"Wot are you doing here?" asked the outraged landlady.

"Looking after Victoria," replied the boy. "She was taken ill and I heard her crying and groaning. . . . She's better now. . . . Quite all right."

"HO!" observed Mrs. Thynne again, "she is, is she?" and turned her fierce accusatory regard upon Victoria.

"You filthy little slut of a workhouse foundling!" she continued. "Under my very roof!"

"You can't expect people to go on your very roof to be ill, Mrs. Thynne," interrupted Otho. "Not on a cold wet night, anyhow."

"And out into the street you go in the mornin'," concluded the lady.

"I go out into the street every morning," yawned Otho, and added, "Let me get you a shawl, Mrs. Thynne, you'll catch your death of cold."

"You'll catch something, come to-morrow," the landlady replied menacingly.

"A train I expect," agreed Otho, without any apparent ruefulness. "Victoria and I are thinking of running up to Town."

"Thinkin' of gettin' married p'raps," sneered Mrs. Thynne.

Otho laughed.

"Quite a match-maker!" was his reply. "And now do let me beg of you to go back to bed. . . . Cold, you know. . . . Beauty-sleep and all that."

"Bloomin' sauce!" snorted Mrs. Thynne angrily.

"Yes. Blooming source of all delights and comforts—go to bed . . ." answered Otho.

"Ho, yas! And leave you 'ere with that little trollop! Likely, ain't it? . . . Clear out o' this yourself an' be quick about it. I'll see the Dean in the mornin'. . . . An' as for you, you lyin' deceitful 'orrible' ussy, I've a mind to put you out into the gutter now. Where you come from an' where you belong, you. . . . Defilin' a respectable 'ouse . . ." and to register increased horror at this aggravation of the shamefulness of the situation, Mrs. Thynne stepped dramatically back as she threw forth her hands and a shower of candle grease.

The effect was marred by her stepping on to the plate containing the scraps and rat-poison.

"Wot's this?" she cried, eyeing the mess. And, pointing at the sobbing Victoria, delivered herself further. "Stealin' too! . . . I wondered where all the food went. . . . So you're a thief as well, are you, you filthy little snipe?"

"Shut up," snapped Otho, "I put that there. It's not yours at all—unfortunately. . . . Now do go to bed and gather strength to work all these wonders in the morning. . . . Good night, Mrs. Thynne," and he arose.

"Promise me faithfully you won't do what you said, Victoria," he commanded, "and I promise faithfully that I'll do what I said. . . . You'll be all right. I'll stick to my promise to you, and help you. You can trust me absolutely."

Victoria promised, and, herding Mrs. Thynne before him, he went out, leaving the room to darkness and to Victoria.

"Now, Mrs. Thynne," he said to that tremblingly outraged lady, "you can help people in trouble or you can make their

trouble worse. . . . I am going to take care of Victoria and . . ."

"Huh! I've 'eard that kind of talk before," sneered Mrs. Thynne.

"Well I hope he kept his promise to you, Mrs. Thynne," observed Otho. . . . "As I was saying, I am going to help Victoria at once. She'll certainly kill herself if I don't keep my word to her. . . . If you like to behave kindly and helpfully to her, you'll lose nothing by it. Not even virtue—and I'll . . ."

"Oh stop your jorin', do," interrupted Mrs. Thynne. "You keep it for the Dean, and I'll deal with that dirty little garden-cat," and the lady turned to go to her room.

§ 2

Four o'clock in the morning, and complete revulsion of spirit. The medal reversed. But an hour or two ago, a gallant knight-errant, tilting against a dragon of destruction and despair, rescuing a beauteous damsel in distress, righting a wrong without count of gain or cost, doing a fine deed finely, and . . . *noblesse oblige* . . . *"I Saye and I Doe."*

Now, a remarkably different picture—an incredible young fool seeking sorrow for himself in a situation that already contained too much. His own future needed every consideration, yet he was saddling himself with a promise to help a congenital suicide and weakling whose sins had found her out.

Is one one's brother's keeper? And one's sister's keeper? Depends on the "one" presumably.

Unutterable fool,—or knight-errant? Or unutterably foolish knight-errant?

At any rate, the question was now of purely academic interest. *I Saye and I Doe.*

To save a life. . . . To save a soul. For the saving of a soul is not giving it a better religion, or a different religion, or any religion at all; but giving it faith, hope and charity and the belief in Good.

And Mother? Well, the dear old darling had been a servant herself, and probably had never been happy for an hour as Lady Mandeville-Bellême. She would not cast the first stone at Victoria. Not on social grounds anyhow. Nor on

any other, for she had a great warm loving heart. . . . And a knowledge of her world.

Joe Mummery? Well—he had loved a lass who was a servant-girl. Probably he'd get very fond of Victoria, and help him to help her. . . . Yes, but what about this boxing-defeat—the pricking of the bubble, Robert Blame's reputation? He was most bitterly disappointed there. In the circumstances Joe was not likely to be of any help. . . . Probably wash his hands of Otho altogether.

Otho sat up in bed.

The fight . . . Joe Mummery . . . Joe Mummery. . . . The fight. . . . His brain was whirling, and the events of the last twenty-four hours jostled each other in hurrying confusion. . . . Jack Maykings . . . Margaret . . . Oxford finished, and who cared a damn? I care for nobody, no not I, and nobody cares for me. . . . Margaret made that plain enough, didn't she? . . . Margaret! . . . Presumably one can admit that a girl is the sweetest, loveliest and dearest person, the most splendid comrade . . . without pretending to be in love with her.

In love with Margaret . . . ? Hadn't he always been in love with Margaret. . . . The day when she had allowed Punch to go up her sleeve and emerge at the back of her neck, without a tremor.

Had he not on that day realised his love for the chubby child, and had she not retained it ever since? Of course there had been months, years, during that awful time at Tonbury, when her memory had faded and grown dim; when her image had receded to the back of his mind, and when he had deliberately set himself to forget her and everything that ever went with the old days at Yelverbury.

But how it had all flared up again when he had seen her; or at any chance mention of her name! And how Jack's proximity at Oxford had brought back memory after memory, and imperceptibly, subtly, re-created an old attitude of mind.

Of course he was in love with Margaret!

Of course he always had been and always would be in love with Margaret.

Before the world had warmed to life. After it had cooled to death. Before Time had mysteriously emerged from Eternity, his soul had loved the soul of Margaret, and after Time

had merged back into Eternity, Margaret's soul would be loved by his.

Of course he loved Margaret. . . . But she was lost to him.

Still—that was no reason for sitting down and tearing his hair. Nor for adding to the mass of minor love-poetry in the world. Nor for being a maudlin useless and sentimental ass. What he could do was to hope that Margaret would be as happy with Maligni as he himself would have been with Margaret. And, on the practical side he could do something useful for this poor kid . . . and so to Victoria. . . . Poor little Victoria. . . Victoria . . . Victoria. . . . No—Paddington. . . . Going to Victoria or Paddington, Sir Otho? Victoria . . . Margaret.

Deep sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

IN the morning, Otho arose with the feeling that he had aged considerably in the last twenty-four hours.

Yesterday—an undergraduate hopeful of academic honours, certain of athletic distinction, destined for a life of intellectual labour, admired and beloved by certain good friends—such as Joe Mummery, Mr. Braddle, the Old Pirate and—and—well—one or two others perhaps. . . .

To-day—ruined, cut off from academic success, lost to all hope of athletic distinction, destined for a life of—what? . . . Plumbing? . . . He was now pledged to help a servant-girl, a girl admittedly in trouble. . . . And he had promised to shoulder that trouble . . . under the influence of immeasurable pity—evoked by her heart-breaking sobbing and her pitiful story, her threats of self-destruction,—her actual effort at self-destruction.

But, after all, he needn't really add that dead-weight of another person's trouble to his own. . . . Why should he shoulder Victoria's burdens? . . . In the cold light of morning it all looked so different.

He was leaving Oxford to-day. He could give her what little money he could spare, and shake from his feet the rather sordid dust of . . . No! Shame! *"I Saye and I Doe."* . . . Had he not most definitely and emphatically told her that he would stand by her, and that if she promised that she would not attempt suicide, he would see her through? Was this another example of the "obstinacy" for which he had so often been rebuked and punished—or was it admirable firmness and steadfastness . . . one's word one's bond?

It was common kindness and decency, anyhow, to help the girl as he had promised.

But why couldn't Victoria make a clean breast of it, and help him to help her? He had half a mind to abandon her to her fate—but no, *"I Saye and I Doe!"*

Even for his nineteen years he was very young in some respects.

§ 2

His breakfast of dubious coffee and doubtful egg was served by Mrs. Thynne in person, and in a thunder-cloud of wrath.

To Otho's pleasant, "Good morning," she vouchsafed no reply, and to his request:

"Will you kindly tell Victoria that I wish to see her," she answered briefly:

"No, I won't."

"Then I will," said Otho, rising; and going to the head of the stairs that led to the dingier depths beneath, he called, "Victoria! . . . Will you come here a minute, please."

But as an echo, from behind him, came the voice of Mrs. Thynne, uttering the discouraging words:

"You set foot on them stairs, you filthy cat, and I'll smack your face for you, and put you and your box in the gutter, without a penny in your pocket too, till the end of the month —and that's a fortnight hents, an' don't you forgit it neither."

"Victoria!" called Otho again. "Will you come here a minute, please."

Victoria appeared at the bottom of the flight of stairs, a white-faced, dark-eyed, woe-begone spectacle of misery.

"She'd 'it me," whimpered the wretched girl.

"I hope she will," replied Otho, "and then she'll go to prison for assault, and also lose her licence to keep lodgings. . . . And when she emerges from the common gaol, I shall persecute—I mean prosecute—her for slander, and back she'll go . . . for years."

Mrs. Thynne inhaled deeply, opened and closed her mouth silently, and burst into tears.

"Me!" she shrieked, and fled upstairs. . . .

"Now, Victoria," said Otho, and the girl came up to the narrow passage called "the hall," where he awaited her.

"Come into my room," said Otho, and Victoria obeyed. "Now, then," he began, "what about it?"

The girl stared, and then began to cry.

"Who is he, Victoria?" he asked.

"I don' know," sobbed the girl.

"What are his initials? . . . You confessed last night that you knew them."

"Shan't tell," said Victoria, with a note of obstinate defiance in her voice.

"But I could do so much more for you if I knew who the man is."

The sound that Victoria made was not so much a laugh as a snort of contempt.

"Funny way to help me," she said.

"You utterly refuse to give me any sort of clue?" asked Otho.

"Course I do!" was the reply.

What could her reason be?

"Well," said he, "since you won't tell me his name nor his initials, and so prevent me from helping you as much as I might—are you going to promise me most solemnly and faithfully that you will not commit suicide?"

"No—I am not," replied Victoria. "I am going to do away with meself. . . . I can't stand it any longer. . . . I'm frightened to death. . . . It's the awful waitin'. . . . The feelin' that trouble and punishment and disgrace are comin' nearer an' nearer. . . . I can't stand it, I tell you. . . . I stood it long enough. . . . I jump every time there's a knock at the door—and I sweat if I meet a p'leeceman. . . . I can't sleep either. . . . And now she's on me track, it's all up with me. . . . She'd send for the p'leece as soon as . . ."

"Don't talk such rot, Victoria—police indeed! . . . Oh, you mean for attempted suicide? . . . Yes, if she knew about that, and sent for the police, you might go to prison. . . . You would, in fact."

"Well then—it's prison anyway—and I'm not going there. I'll put an end to me trouble, all right, Mr. Blame, and thank you very kindly, Sir."

Otho pondered for a minute.

"Look here," he said. "Pack your trunk and have it ready after lunch. I'm going away by the 3.15 train, and you are coming with me. . . . If I take you away from here, will you swear you'll never think of suicide again? . . . There'll be no need to, either, for I'll look after you and take care of you. You'll have nothing to fear and no one to fear. . . . My mother will look after you. . . . Will you promise?"

Victoria wept afresh, was almost dissolved in tears, and declared with the most heartfelt sincerity and gratitude that

she would do anything and promise anything if Otho would only take her from that horrible place.

"Good!" said the boy, when she had finished. "Be ready by two-thirty and we'll go down to the station in the same cab."

Of course they would. Inside that beastly house she might be Victoria the Drudge, practically the slave of the horrible Mrs. Thynne. Outside that beastly house she was Miss Victoria Somebody—he did not know her name—the friend of Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, who was escorting her to Tonbury to enjoy his mother's hospitality for a time!

§ 3

Otho's interview with the Dean was as peculiar as he had expected, if less painful.

He frankly and fully stated the facts of the necessity for his leaving Oxford, and having done so, he added the truth concerning Victoria, so far as he knew it. The Dean had heard many strange tales in the course of his long and wide experience, and he wondered if this were not the strangest.

"And where are you taking this girl, Mr. Bellême?" he expostulated.

"To my mother, Sir," replied Otho. "I hope and believe that she'll sleep under my mother's roof to-night."

"Well, well, well," mused the Dean, his elbow on his desk, his great head resting on his hand, as he toyed with a pencil and stared unseeingly at the big sheet of blotting-paper spread before him. "I really do not know what to say, or to think, Mr. Bellême. Have you—er—any—er—personal and private interest in this girl—if I may ask the question?"

"None whatever, Sir."

"You are not what is—er—called—ah—in love with her?"

"Not in the slightest, Sir."

"Are you quite sure it is just the purest altruism—the highest and most disinterested charity, Mr. Bellême? . . . And aren't you undertaking something more serious than you realise it to be—something of which no one can foresee the end—in making yourself responsible for this poor girl?"

The Dean watched him curiously—his fine and powerful face wearing a look of deep interest.

"Do you quite realise what you are doing in making yourself responsible for her?" he continued. "You know what the world and his wife,—especially his wife,—will think and say and do. . . . They will certainly 'revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you—falsely'—falsely, I firmly believe."

"It may be folly, Sir," said Otho, "but . . ."

"It is folly," interrupted the Dean. "Great folly. . . . Nearly as great as the worldly and social folly of some of those who have left all and followed . . .

"Notice that I have not said one word in condemnation of your conduct. I have merely tried to find out whether you have the least idea of the magnitude and importance of the step you have taken—and whether you have considered your mother and family. . . . We must not indulge in vicarious charity, sacrifice and suffering."

The deep voice boomed on and the kindly big face, that from time to time was raised and turned full to that of Otho, shone with earnest goodness, and a gentle strength of virtue.

In the end: "Good-bye, Mr. Bellême. I am extremely sorry that you must leave Oxford. . . . Let me know if I can help you in any way . . . at any time. . . ."

CHAPTER IX

OTHO paid the cabman at the door of the closed shop of his Uncle Bill Briggs that night, and with a high head and a heavy heart embarked upon the task that he began to realize might be infinitely more difficult and painful than that of interviewing the Dean of St. Simeon's.

He rang the bell, a light appeared as an inner door was opened, and Miss Briggs entered the shop.

Having turned up a lowered gas jet, she unlocked the shop door.

"You!" she exclaimed, seized Otho by the shoulders, and standing on tiptoe, kissed him twice on the mouth.

Otho, courteous always, refrained from wiping his lips, or in any way making it evident that he loathed being kissed by Miss Briggs.

"How are you, Liz?" he said.

But Liz replied not, for she was staring open-mouthed at Victoria, who looked exactly what she was, a poor little servant-girl in her terrible cheap finery, and in deep distress.

"Who on earth is this?" inquired Miss Briggs.

"My friend, Miss Victoria Bate," replied Otho and, turning to Victoria, added:

"This is my cousin Miss Eliza Briggs."

"Your cousin!" murmured Victoria incredulously—and Liz retired to the door at the back of the shop, and shouted:

"Mother! Here's young Bob come home an' brought his girl."

Mrs. Briggs, Lady Mandeville-Bellême, Mr. Briggs, George, who was at home, and Bert, rallied to the cry and entered the kitchen sitting-room, to which, after dragging their two boxes into the shop, Otho had penetrated, followed by a bewildered and faltering Victoria. (Was this where the gentleman lived—an' him an undergraduate an' all!)

"Why, what's all this. . . . You have never come home, Bob?" panted Mrs. Briggs, who arrived first upon the scene. "Gimme a kiss, dearie—and who's this young—er—woman?"

And before he could answer, Lady Mandeville-Bellême entered the room and cast herself upon the bosom of her son, who put his arms about her neck and hugged her to him as he kissed her upon both cheeks, and the still firm red lips.

"My darling boy!" she cried, "I am so glad to see you. Got a holiday from your lessons and paid us a surprise visit? . . . You ought to have written an' we'd have had something tasty for your supper," . . . and looking for the first time from her son's face she realised the presence of Victoria.

"Who's this gel?" she said, and putting her hand to her heart, she added: "Blest if it isn't the gel from your lodgings, Otho! What is it, dear? . . . What she come here with you for? . . . What is it, my poor darling boy?"

"Well, give me a chance to speak, Duchess, and I'll tell you," replied Otho, and he hoped that his voice sounded as casual and care-free as he tried to make it. "This is Miss Victoria Bate, and I have told her that you are the kindest and best-hearted woman in the world, and that you'll help her and stand by her, in . . ."

"Cor lummy!" whispered Uncle Bill Briggs, and Liz burst into shrill laughter.

"I thought as much when I saw the poor young thing," she observed venomously. . . .

"Well, have a heart—and be kind to her then," said George.

"Same to you, George," replied Miss Briggs. "Take her part, me lad—an' p'raps you'll be lucky too."

". . . and help her," continued Otho. . . . "She needs it, poor girl—and so I brought her to you, Mother . . . and look here—I don't want to talk about her in front of the whole lot of you. . . . I want to talk to you, mother, and to Aunt—alone . . . with Victoria."

Lady Mandeville-Bellême sat down heavily. Her chin trembled and her lips twitched, as she felt for a handkerchief.

"Oh, Otho, my boy! . . . I'd never have believed it of you. . . . My boy! . . . My boy! . . ." and the tears coursed down her cheeks.

"You in trouble, my girl?" snapped Mrs. Briggs, at the pale and trembling Victoria, who was biting at her dirty

cotton glove while the strange and nameless flowers that adorned her white straw hat, shook with her shaking.

"Yes," whispered Victoria. . . . "Awful."

"Then get out o' this Christian house as quick as you like," replied Mrs. Briggs.

"Hold on, Mother! . . . Have a heart! . . . Have a heart! . . . You were in trouble yourself once!" spoke up George. It was the turn of Mrs. Briggs to collapse upon a chair.

"Wot?" she cried. "Wot? . . . God help me! God help me and forgive you—you dreadful wicked boy. . . . My own son! . . . I can't speak. . . . I can't believe I heard right. . . . Me! Trouble! . . . You shocking, unnatural . . ."

"Ho? Weren't you in trouble then when you lost your purse"—(Victoria started, and stared open-mouthed at George)—"that day—an' the Old Man here pretending you'd pinched the money yourself. . . . Weren't you in trouble then, you hard-hearted old geezer?"

"Trouble!" ejaculated Mrs. Briggs. "Talk sense and talk English, or else don't talk at all! That was sorrow at loss of good money an' a broken heart at false accusations. . . . I'm talkin' about Trouble. . . . An' now the lot o' you men can clear out, an' you too, young Liz. . . . Go on."

Otho had watched the faces of Victoria's self-appointed judges, while his aunt uttered her tirade.

His mother's expressed nothing but shocked grief and utter misery. His aunt's showed a mingling of surprise, contempt and anger.

On his uncle's enlightened countenance dwelt a look of fond imagination that contended unsuccessfully with one of outraged propriety.

The face of Liz expressed an emotion of concentrated bitter jealous hate; while that of Bert wore a look of appreciative appraisement.

George looked sorry, sympathetic and indignant. . . .

"Who are you orderin' out o' the room, may I ask?" inquired Mr. Briggs loftily, turning from his prolonged examination of Victoria.

"You," spoke up Mrs. Briggs, strong and brave in her sense of being on her own ground, a woman dealing with the affairs of woman. . . . "Out you go—an' set an example."

"Come on, Old 'Un," said George, taking his father's arm,

and as they passed Bert, he brought that young gentleman to earth with what he termed a "biff on the napper," a technical term used by him for indicating certain forms of violence.

Liz also departed, expressing as she did so a strong desire for a less polluted and contaminating atmosphere.

"Tell me the truth, Otho dearie," wept Lady Mandeville-Bellême. "I never liked the prancin' hussy, the moment I set eyes on her in your rooms, I didn't."

"Now please listen, both of you—and since you haven't had the kindness to ask Miss Bate to sit down, I'll do it myself."

"Sit down, gel," commanded Mrs. Briggs.

"Now then," continued Otho, "you are good-hearted and generous women, both of you. . . . Listen to me—and don't be so ready and anxious to condemn anybody unheard.

"This girl, Miss Victoria Bate, was in such dreadful fear and terror that she tried to commit suicide—last night. I actually found her with rat-poison spread on bread, and she was going to eat it in her bed—at two o'clock this morning!"

"An' what were you doing in a young female's bedroom at two o'clock in the mornin', might I ask?" interrupted Mrs. Briggs.

"I'm telling you, Aunt, if you'll listen—and keep your heart as well as your ears open," replied Otho. "I heard her sobs and groans as I was going to my room, and I rushed in to see what was the matter. . . . Suicide was the matter, and I was only just in time. And I am trying to get her out of trouble. I have come to two kind warm-hearted motherly women—to give them a chance to show their generosity and Christian charity."

Victoria was crying copiously.

The boy turned to her.

"Cheer up, Victoria," he said. "They don't understand yet."

"Mother!" he broke out, "when I found Victoria in such awful trouble, and so determined to destroy herself, I faithfully promised her that I would help her and stand by her. I gave her my word of honour. . . ."

"Then you was a fool," piped up a high thin voice, and all eyes turned in astonishment to where in his deep chair

in the dark ingle-nook, Great-Grandfather Hawkins sat, overlooked, neglected and forgotten.

Tense silence fell.

"*Wot* did he say?" asked Mrs. Briggs at last.

"When you give 'em some food?" piped Great-Grandfather Hawkins again. And once again:

"I keep on saying, *'They want s'm food,'* don't I? . . . Can't anybody hear me? . . . *You* aren't deaf, too, are you?"

"Blest if I didn't think he called some one a fool," observed Mrs. Briggs. "I'd never put it past him, the old villain."

"You needn't mind him, my gel," she continued to Victoria, "for he's as stone-deaf as a wooden post, an' a dratted old nuisance too."

The old nuisance fixed a frosty blue eye upon Otho, and behind the backs of his grand-daughters, winked at his great-grandson.

"I was saying," continued the latter, "that I solemnly promised Victoria that I would help her and save her if she solemnly promised not to kill herself. . . . Well—I am going to do it. . . . Now—are you going to help me or not? . . . Because if not, I am going elsewhere—for when *I Saye, I Doe.*"

"Let whoever got her into trouble, get her out," murmured his mother.

"And look here, young Bob," broke in Mrs. Briggs, "all this talk may be all right—and it may not. An' does this innocent young female by any chance know you happen to be by rights Sir Otho Mangle-Blame, might I ask? You may be just a fool, or you may be a knave—or again you may be both. But what's plain and certain's this. This is a respectable house, an' I've got a daughter an' two sons in it—not to mention a husband—nor the fact that I an' your mother aren't used to associatin' with Jumpin' Jezebels an' don't intend to. So you can take it from me plain—out she goes, now, and out she stays, an' you can please yourself whether you go with the baggage or stay in this Christian home with your relations."

"Yes. I'm afraid it's a Christian home, all right," said Otho. "I suppose nine Christian women out of ten would say exactly the same thing. . . . Quite right too. . . . Hor-

rid job trying to square expediency with Christianity—sometimes. . . . I don't blame you, Aunt. . . . Good-night."

"What!" cried Lady Mandeville-Bellême, brought suddenly, by the sound of the fatal word, from the depths of the amazement in which she had dully listened to the conversation of her sister and her son.

"What did you say, Otho! . . . 'Good night!' And you only just come—an' not had anything to eat nor drink. . . . You wouldn't be so wicked as to go out into the night with that—that—that . . . from under your mother's very roof, Otho!" and the poor lady extended a trembling hand to her son, while she pressed the other against her heart.

"I am sorry, Mother," replied the boy. "I have given my promise. . . . If you and Aunt Aggie turn Victoria away, I must go and see her settled somewhere."

Of course he must—*I Saye and I Doe!* . . . Was the Last of the Bellêmes to break his word—his word given to a girl, a poor girl in direst need? Go back on his solemn promise at the first rebuff? . . . It was cruelly hard on poor Mother—but a promise is a promise. . . . And it lay in her own hands to keep him, if she wanted him to stay. If she insisted, Aunt Aggie would give way—with however bad a grace. . . . He would not own it to himself—he would not, even for a second, admit such an emotion—but he knew that if he looked into his heart, he would find bitter disappointment and disillusion. Was this the mother whom he held to be the sweetest, kindliest, most warm-hearted and generous of women?

"Good night then, Mother," he said miserably.

Lady Mandeville-Bellême fell back into her chair, and drooped, sagging sideways as her head sank limply on to her shoulder.

"Quick!" cried Mrs. Briggs. "It's her spasms. . . . Help me lay her flat—an' throw some water on her face an' hands, out of that flower-vase, while I get some brandy."

While she spoke, Otho was doing the proper things for the restoration of one who has fainted.

"See what you've done to her, you wicked boy!" gabbled Mrs. Briggs, as she returned with brandy and water in a tumbler which she clinked against her sister's clenched teeth, while its contents flowed round, but not down, the unfortunate lady's neck. "It's her spasms."

It was; also her strained and out-worn heart, physically affected by years of mental pain and sorrow, its condition a somatic symptom of a neurosis of repression.

"She's coming round," murmured Otho, as he knelt, holding his mother's hand, and dripping water from his handkerchief upon her forehead.

"Yes—and no thanks to you, you wicked heartless, wicked boy."

"Don't choke her with that brandy," replied Otho. "Wait till she can sit up and sip it. . . . Take it away, I tell you." . . . And the woman meekly obeyed the dominant male—for in her heart of hearts Woman knows that the Dominant Male is a child and a fool—and that he is generally right in matters of practical concern. . . .

Victoria gazed, cow-like, too weary, bewildered and depolarised for speech or action, her mind too dulled to respond to the stimulus of further impression.

Great-Grandfather Hawkins gazed, god-like, too remote and removed for interest in "all these wimmin's nonsense, fallals, doodahs, vapours, and fainting-fakes for an excuse to get the brandy-bottle out."

Lady Mandeville-Bellême "came round," drank, felt better, and was soon assisted to a hoary sofa that stood indomitable in ruin, still offering to mankind a resting-place, hard but reliable, consisting entirely of old newspapers.

"Now p'raps you'll clear that young person out—now you've nearly killed your mother—and repent your sins an' learn to behave yerself," observed Mrs. Briggs, as she soothed and patted her sister and indefatigably strove to induce her to drink more and yet more of the brandy that so nauseated her.

Otho's face was drawn and white, his eyes black-circled, his lips pale and thin.

"I shall see you again very soon, darling," he murmured, as he knelt beside the couch and kissed his mother. "I feel miserable at leaving you . . . I . . ."

"You aren't going to leave your poor mother, to-night, now—an' you nearly killed her an' all . . ." cried Mrs. Briggs. "I wonder God doesn't . . ."

"Yes—I'm going now," interrupted Otho in his turn. "Thanks to you, largely, Aunt Aggie. . . . I'll stop if you invite Victoria to stop. . . . I could sleep on this couch."

Mrs. Briggs rose to her feet and turned to the dumb and half-comatose Victoria.

"Here, you," she said, pointing dramatically, "go. . . . Go on. . . . Out of this house. . . ."

"Come along, Victoria," said Otho, and he gave his mother a last kiss and rose to his feet. "Good night, mother. . . . Good night, Aunt Aggie, and many thanks. . . . Don't miss Wednesday evening service at your Chapel—dedicated to the God of Love, Faith and Charity—whom you diligently worship. . . . Especially Charity . . ." and he turned to the door.

But the Old Pirate had a word to say.

"Half a mo', me boy," he piped, getting to his feet. "I want to speak to you private a minute, if you're flyin' the Blue Peter. . . . Come to my cabin. . . . Let the young party stand by to go about . . ." and he led the way to his room.

With a curt "Don't move, please, Victoria," to the girl, and a "Please leave her alone for a minute," to his aunt, Otho followed the old man to his room.

Having unlocked his door and tremblingly lighted a candle, the Old Pirate turned to his great-grandson and viewed him frostily.

"Been wenchin', boy? . . . Oh, how horrible! . . . What will the Holy Pastor say? . . . An' actually brought your Black Eyed Susan to this godly house. . . . Oh, how horrible! . . . This godly chapel-goin' home of Mr. Bloomin' Bill Briggs. . . . Oh, how horrible! . . . I feel all polluted-like meself. Fair contaminated, I do. . . . Shake hands, Bob, an' don't squash my poor old knuckles. . . . That's right. . . .

"How much do you want, Bob? . . . Ten pounds keep you goin' for a bit? . . . No, no, it isn't robbin' me. . . . Nobody ever robbed me yet. . . . I can give—I mean lend—you ten pound as soon as look at you, Bob. I got pretty nigh a hundred, Bob, I have. . . . Never think it to look at me, would you?

"Well, well—I can't have any fun meself nowadays, Bob, but I can help you to have a bit. . . . She reminds me of a gel I had—ah, more than seventy years ago—down in Devonshire when I was with the Brixham trawlers (an' it wasn't all trawlin' we did either) . . . I loved her truly, Bob, an'

she spoilt all other women for me—don't care who—French, Kanaka, Dutch, Japanese, Portugal, West Indies, China gels, or any South Sea Island wenches.

"She spoilt me for 'em she did. . . . That's the worst of good women. . . . I used to think of her as I stood my trick of the wheel or lyin' on the foc's'le head all through the starry nights—real bit of Devon. . . . Lord—what was her name now? . . .

"Here's your ten pound, Bob boy. . . . We're only young once, dammus . . ." and he thrust the ten sovereigns into Otho's hand, having conjured them from the toe of an old sock, which he produced from the famous sea-chest.

"Listen, Sir," said Otho. "Thank you more than I can say, on behalf of a good girl in bad trouble. I'll use the money for her and I'll repay it. . . . You are helping to save a poor girl's life."

"Mustn't leave 'em in the lurch, Bob. . . . I know you wouldn't do that. . . . Treat her straight. . . . I never bilked a gel in my life, and I've done most wickedness, God helpin' —I mean thank God—that is to say God forgive me, I mean. . . . No. Have your fun an' plenty of it, but don't leave anybody else to pay for it. . . .

"I'm glad you brought her, Bob, if it's only for the red eye Bill Briggs is gettin' squintin' through the key-hole at her. . . . Besides, I'm glad to have seen the little dear, and I'm glad you acted as you have, and spoke up for her. . . . An' I lay it was her began it and put the come-hither on you."

"I was telling them the truth, Sir," interrupted the patient Otho. "She was the servant at my digs and I really did find her committing suicide and I promised to help her and to stand by her in return for her promise that she wouldn't do away with herself."

"She was your serving-maid and she's in trouble—and you didn't have anything to do with it!" quavered the old man. . . . "Ho! . . . Good night, Bob boy, an' God bless-yer," and Great-Grandpapa gently propelled Otho from his presence.

§ 2

On descending to the kitchen sitting-room, Otho found that the excluded four had made the report of Lady Mande-

ville-Bellême's seizure an excuse to return to the spot unhallowed by the presence of Victoria.

It was variously reported that the unfortunate mother had fallen dead in the act of cursing her son, that she had died quietly of a broken heart, and that she had hit her head against the gas-bracket, inflicting an ugly but superficial wound.

All eyes were fixed in a concentrated stare upon the unfortunate Victoria, who was gazing woodenly before her.

"I'm sorry to have kept you so long, Victoria," Otho said, "and I apologise for the reception you have had here . . . and what has been said . . . always excepting my mother, who is ill, and not herself.

"Good night, my dear kind hospitable friends," he added, as he opened the door leading into the shop, "all equally without sin and able to cast the first stone. . . . Come along, Victoria," and he seized her small tin trunk in his powerful hands and swung it up on to his broad shoulder.

Only George followed him into the shop, if one excepts the voice of Mr. Briggs, which pursued him with injunctions, Never to darken his doors again and never again to bring his mother's grey hairs—er—black hairs (as Lady Mandeville-Bellême glanced at him indignantly), in sorrow to the grave, nor bring disgrace upon a respectable chapelgoin' family . . . until bidden by George to shut up.

"Here, Bob," George added, "I've got two quid an' a silver watch that'll fetch ten bob. . . . Let me give 'em to your young lady—from a cousin-in-law-to-be, like. . . . I'm not in regular work just now, or I c'd offer more. . . . With my best respects, Miss, an' wishin' you all the best."

Otho wrung George's hand.

"No need, old chap," he said. "I'll get work of some sort, and see her safe somewhere. . . . You might take care of my trunk until I come for it. . . . So long, old man," and he opened the shop door.

George pressed the two sovereigns and the great ugly watch into Victoria's willing hand, as she passed out into the dark street.

CHAPTER X

"WELL, Victoria, my child, life grows complicated, doesn't it?" said Otho after a few minutes of silent walking. "I am a little way on the road to my wits' end."

Night—a heavy trunk—a tired girl, sullen and miserable—and nowhere to go. . . . Where did people go in such circumstances? To hotels of course.

They would go to the "White Hart." That was the best, because it was the only, hotel that Tonbury boasted. Public-houses there were in plenty, ranging from the gin-palatial "Marquis of Granby" to the dirty beer-shop, "Ring o' Bells."

Yes, he would take her to the "White Hart," give her a jolly good dinner-supper, take a room for her, and then find somewhere for himself. In the morning he would visit his mother, get her to himself, and put things before her so that she could see them in a proper light—according to his own light, in fact.

But he must not ask her to appeal to her sister, nor must he himself endeavour to soften her and get her to take Victoria into the house. . . . The bosom of that pious family was no place of refuge for a strayed lamb—he might have known it. . . . Life there would be hell for her. . . . Liz . . . Bert . . . Uncle Bill Briggs . . . Aunt Aggie . . . the Pastor, whose sole conception of Sin was sexual "sin."

"Not much further, my dear," he said to Victoria, who trailed behind him.

"*'With my bundle on my shoulder,'*" hummed Otho, and then, "*'With my true love by my side.'* . . . Quite so. . . . Must look like a couple of tramps—who have done with the Tents of Shem, dear lass, and seen the seasons through and are now on the Old Trail, our own Trail, the out Trail, the Trail that's always new . . . and a lot more sentimental bilge, unappreciated when you are homeless and hungry and desire nothing less than the 'long trail'—round Tonbury looking for a lodging.

"Here we are! . . . Troubles nearly over . . ." and Otho

led the way into the small and smelly "lounge" of an ancient, decent, quiet hostelry, a typical English small-town hotel-public-house, that depends much more on its bar and billiard-room than on its bedrooms and dining-room.

But, alas, their troubles were not nearly over.

In a cosy little sitting-room whose big open window looked into the lounge, a hard-faced woman sat, the landlady of the "White Hart," and wrestled grimly with accounts.

At the sound of Otho's setting down of Victoria's trunk, she looked up, displaying a rosaceous countenance, small eyes, heavy black brows, a purple-veined nose and golden hair.

At Victoria she stared in hostile amazement.

"I want a room for to-night—and perhaps a few more nights, for my friend, please," said Otho as the lady advanced to the desk-counter on the inner side of he window, still eyeing Victoria with a look that was an insult.

"Single or double?" inquired the lady.

"Oh, single, of course," replied Otho.

The lady again looked Victoria over from head to foot, and eloquently refrained from comment.

"That your luggage?" she asked, and the battered yellow tin trunk seemed to grow smaller, more battered, more yellow even, beneath her contemptuous glance.

"Yes, if you please, m'm," admitted Victoria.

"Married?"

"No, if you please, m'm."

"Where've you come from?" further inquired the lady, "and what's this—er—gentleman, to you?"

"We aren't here for an examination nor for a competition in conundrums," announced Otho. "I asked you if you had a single room vacant for this young lady for the night."

"No, I haven't. Nor yet a double one," was the reply, accompanied by a hard stare. "Nor likely to."

"Look here," said Otho quietly, "I have a vague but persistent idea that you cannot refuse your—er—hospitality, shall we say—to anybody who claims it and can pay for it. Any decent person, that is."

"Quite so. Any decent person," interrupted the lady.

"Then what are we wasting time about?" asked Otho.

"Just what I want to know," replied the lady. "I've told you there's no room here. Not for that sort. Will you please take away the rubbish you've dumped there."

"I say—is there a man here that I can deal with . . ." asked Otho. . . . "I can't open my heart properly to a lady when my friends are impudently insulted and my just and lawful demands are illegally refused."

"Oh, yes," said the lady and rang a bell.

A girl in a black dress, white cap and apron, entered the lounge, and eyed Victoria with distaste.

"Elbert," said the lady cryptically and the girl retired.

"Her proud, adoring husband," thought Otho, and bade Victoria go and sit on a settee on the other side of the lounge.

A door opened and Elbert appeared, a potman and chucker-out revealed.

Elbert had fair hair that his fancy led him to smooth flatly down to his eyebrows and then to lead right-handed across his forehead, and upward aspiringly into the free air. Elbert had a broken nose, a massive jowl, a bull neck and those protuberances above the eyes, that may be observed in the shy gorilla—by those few who are privileged to observe the shy gorilla.

Elbert was free from the encumbrance of waistcoat, coat and collar, but his white dress-shirt was, at the neck, both fastened and adorned by a large diamond, or what may be termed near-diamond, stud. His up-rolled shirt-sleeves exposed enormous hairy forearms, and a long white apron hid all other beauties save his wholly adequate feet.

"Here's the man you can deal with," said the lady, adding as she turned away, "p'raps he can find you a boy to take that tin box away, if you've got the tuppence."

"Wossmarrer?" inquired Elbert of Otho.

"Nothing that I know of," replied Otho, "beyond the fact that for no obvious reason, I am unlawfully refused a room —for which I can pay in advance."

"Well, if yore refused, don't 'ang about, Mister, see? *'Ah*tside, please. . . . Come on, Miss, *ah*tside, please. . . . I'll put yer box aht fer nothink," and Elbert suited the action to the word.

Otho had himself well in hand and appeared mild, almost meek.

"You'll hear more about this, Madam," he said through the window to the lady.

The lady sighed.

Not so, Elbert, box on shoulder.

"We 'eard quite enough hallready, Mister," he said. "I'm agoin' to dump this on the pavement an' you can dump yourself there too—come on, I tell you."

Otho took a grip of himself and went.

What good would he do Victoria by kicking up a vulgar row in a provincial pot-house and getting ejected therefrom? What good would he do her now if he smote this insolent potman and then fought him while the landlady sent for the police?

A nice thing for his mother and family if he were in the police-court dock for street brawling, on the day after his arrival with the young woman who had been the servant at his lodgings.

Otho followed Elbert into the street, and as that gentleman dropped the trunk upon the pavement, produced two half-crowns, and with a lordly and careless "Thank you, my lad," presented them to the astounded potman. He had to do something to relieve his feelings, and this was satisfying—and cheaper than thrashing the hotel in the person of Elbert.

Elbert stared at the money, called upon his Maker to impair his eyesight, and upon Otho to accept his warmest testimony to the fact that Otho was a gent and indeed a perfect one.

Heaving the box up once more, Otho settled it on his shoulder and marched off, followed by Victoria and the eye of the perplexed and astounded Elbert.

"Slingin' 'is feet on tramp with 'is bit o' fluff an' their box o' dunnage . . . and scarlet-well 'andin' out five bob a time an' *'Thank you, me lad!'* " said Elbert, and ejaculated a brief orison that his prevailing tint might be suddenly changed to pink.

§ 2

"I am so sorry, Victoria, my dear," apologised Otho, as they trudged along. . . . "We ought to have stayed another night at Oxford. . . . No tea-places or anything open at this time of day. . . . I can't take you into a public-house bar. . . . Never been in one myself, as a matter of fact. . . . We'll see a baker's or sweet-shop or something in a minute, and then we can buy some stuff and sit down and eat it in the Recreation Grounds—if they're still open."

Victoria made no reply.

Disillusioned, puzzled to the depths of her soul, mentally and physically distressed, she was developing a dumb sullenness.

A fine gentleman this—with that gang of common people for his relations. . . . A common plumber's shop . . . that horrible Liz . . . that nasty old man . . . an' those two naggin' wimmin—worse than Old Mother Thynne.

"I know!" said Otho suddenly, breaking in upon her reverie. "The station! . . . We'll be able to get a jolly good meal in the refreshment-rooms—or, at any rate, be able to fill ourselves jolly well with food of some sort. . . . And some good hot coffee or tea. . . . It isn't far. . . . And we can put this box in the left-luggage place and perhaps get a cab or a fly or something."

"Where to?" asked Victoria.

"Oh, I'll find somewhere. . . . Cheer up. . . . I have got an idea. . . . I'll leave you in the Refreshment Room or Waiting Room and go and see a friend of mine."

"Leave me to be called for some other day, I s'pose," commented Victoria. "Lost Property Office."

"I shan't leave you for long. . . . You won't have finished your meal before I am back," replied Otno coldly, suppressing a rising irritation.

Victoria refrained from comment.

As soon as he had seen the girl comfortably ensconced in a corner of the Tonbury Station Refreshment Rooms, and her box deposited in the left-luggage office, Otho hurried off once more.

He had decided to swallow his pride and make an earnest appeal to kind, warm-hearted and generous Joe Mummery.

The door of 16, Laurel Villas was opened by a very large and powerful man, one William Bossom, now retired from the sea, and, with his wife, constituting the domestic staff of his former shipmate,—now Heavy-Weight Champion of England and a man of substance.

"Is Mr. Mummery in, please?" asked Otho.

"Yessir," was the reply. "If you'll step in on to the mat, I'll let a roar at 'im."

Otho entered, and William Bossom opened the door of the front sitting-room.

"Gent to see yer, Joe," he bawled in a half-gale voice. "I forgot to 'and you 'is card on a tea-tray—'im not pervidin' the card, nor me 'avin' no tea-tray 'andy."

"What's his name, you perishin' clumsy, web-footed matlow?" inquired William's master.

"I forgit it, Joe," was the reply. "'Im not 'avin' mentioned it."

"I must send you back to the lower-deck and have a *Marine,* you mouldy flat-footed plate-smasher," announced his master, in the vein and manner, if not the words, of a ward-room Mess President correcting an inefficient mess-waiter.

"Show the gent in here, an' then go an' have your supper, an' don't pinch the cheese out o' the mouse-traps," he continued.

Otho stood no further upon ceremony, but entered the room that he knew so well, and in which he had spent so many happy hours.

"I want a word with you if you can spare a minute, Joe, please," he said.

"William Bossom!" called Mummery, as that excellent servant and faithful friend closed the door.

William Bossom returned.

"Wot you bawlin' for now, Joe?" he inquired.

"See that bloke's mug?" Mummery replied, pointing at Otho.

"Yus, Joe, and very nice too," answered Mr. Bossom.

"Well, next time you see it on my doorstep, kick it off. . . . And every time. . . . See?"

"Right you are, Joe," replied Mr. Mummery's retainer, and taking further stock of Otho, retired.

"I wonder at your brazen-faced impidence—to come here," said Mummery, as the door closed.

"I haven't come on my own account," replied Otho. "Though I should have tried, later on, to get you to understand . . . and to make friends again, Joe. . . . I have come about a girl. . . . She is in trouble."

"You aren't accusin' me, I hope?" interrupted Mummery.

"She was trying to commit suicide, and . . ."

"Not the beautiful young female that you lost the fight through not having the heart to hit her poor young brother

before her very eyes?" again interrupted the sore and angry Champion.

"She is the servant-girl you saw in my rooms," said Otho.

"Ho! Is she? A proper trim little craft too," observed Mummery. "And might you be going to do me the honour of asking me to be Best Man, or something?"

"I was going to ask you if you'd give her shelter here, for the night—and for a day or two, in fact—until I can do something for her. Settle her somewhere, I mean, and see her safe."

Josephus Mummery stared wide-eyed. He rose and thrust his somewhat terrible face near to that of Otho, and his stare grew hypnotic.

"Mr. Remarkable Bloomin' Blame," he said at length, "I almost admire you, I do. In fact, I do quite. . . . I admire any whole-hogger for his whole-hoggishness—however much I may despise him being a hog, nevertheless. . . . You're a whole-hogger all right, me lad! . . . Within twenty-four hours you sell or give away a fight and go back on me to fair break my heart, and you roll up smilin' and ask me to mind your bit o' skirt that you brought away with you when returning triumphant home!

"Left your quarters and brought away your books and clothes an' your bloomin' Harem, have you? . . . And I can mind your fancy girl while you hop around an' look for a place to set her up!

"I'd like to see Bill Bossomses' Missuses' face! She'd learn him—and me, and you, and the young female! . . . Shut the front door as you go out."

"Joe! Look here! Listen! . . . This girl is nothing to me at all. Nothing more than a cat or dog would be to you if you saw it lying with a broken leg, to be stoned by the first gang of street-louts that found it. . . . Would you do anything for it, Joe? Would you leave it, after it had turned a beseeching eye to you for help?"

"Who's talking about cats and dogs?" inquired Joe, for the moment puzzled by this headlong torrent of eloquence.

Otho sighed heavily.

"Listen, Joe," he said patiently. "Do you wish to help a fellow-creature in trouble? . . . A person who is no bigger a sinner than the rest of us. . . . A girl who is in such terror that she will commit suicide if she is not watched."

"Well—and who got her into trouble, if it wasn't you? Is it her husband? Let him get her out of trouble. . . . It's his business, isn't it? Not mine, nor yours. Why're you so interested in the fate of the poor young female? . . . If what you say is true, and she'll tell me who the man is, and where to be found, I'll go and hit him for her, if she likes . . . an' if he is a dirty hound that's deceived her and bilked her an' all. . . . Sometimes these tales aren't all true. . . .

"I knew a poor feller off the *Ajax,* on seven days' shore leaf, going from Pompey to London who had to marry a young female who fainted and fell in his lap in the railway-carriage and no witnesses. . . . He tried to restore her with a bottle of rum he'd been saving up for his old mother, and by the time he gets to Waterloo, he thinks he's been married, that very morning, and he wants to go for his honeymoon in the signal-box.

"Yes—left Pompey innocent and happy—happy as the day is long, without a care in the world—and returns to Pompey married! . . . Married for keeps, that time. . . . This might be a sim'lar sort of party."

"Yes—and you might be a mean-hearted, close-fisted, cowardly rough, who'd trample on a woman because she was down in the mud. . . . But you're . . ." began Otho, and had intended to say that this was just what Joe was not—but he had no time.

Mummery's scowl deepened, and he raised his clenched right hand.

"A mean-hearted cowardly rough, am I?" he said, his voice low, menacing and harsh. "And you're the lad I'd have made . . . the lad I've loved. . . . Mary's boy. . . . A woman you aren't worthy to be the son of—you fight-sellin' wenchin' young swindler! . . . Get out of here—before I forget you're Mary's son an' give you the thrashin' you deserve—you crooked young pimp. . . . Good job you haven't got the guts for boxin'—there's enough low, dirty double-crossers an' tricky ring-side sharks disgracin' the game already. Get out—and sponge on some one else for yourself an' your doxy. . . . Listen—you're a coward, a cur, and an ungrateful swine. . . . See?" and opening the door as if unable to trust himself longer in Otho's presence, he roared:

"Below there! Bill Bossom, ahoy! . . . Here, chuck this

bum-boat woman's tout overboard, an' don't let me find the place overrun with these crimp's pimps an' long-shore loafin' pickpockets again, or you'll hear about it," and he re-entered the room and shut the door.

But Otho opened the door of the room again, before Mr. Bossom could hinder.

"Joe," he said, "you're wrong. . . . And I'll make you own it and apologise. . . . Damn you—you fat-headed, wooden-faced . . ."

Good God! What was this?

Joe had thrown himself down in his arm-chair. He was leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands, his shoulders quivering. A horrible strangled sound came from his throat, and he was shaken from head to foot.

Otho ran across the room and laid his hand on Joe's shoulder, and Joe, springing to his feet, aimed a blow at Otho which would have laid him senseless on the floor. Otho moved his head slightly and gave Joe a violent push that sent him back into his chair as its edge caught the backs of his knees.

Otho fled. He was not going to "rough-house" with Joe. Something quite otherwise was indicated. And Joe had only hit him in his blind rage at being caught—well—blubbering.

Mr. Bossom stared open-mouthed.

"You the 'Eavy-Weight Champion o' the World?" he inquired, as he closed the front door.

"Not yet," replied Otho, ere the door had shut.

Joe Mummery sat on, silent and still, in the cold room, his head again on his hands.

"Nearly broke down, I did. . . . Blasted old fool . . .

"Oh, Bob! Young Bob! I fair loved you, young Bob. . . . Like I never loved anything—'cept your Mother. Oh, God—to think young Bob's no good—either couldn't or wouldn't win his first fight . . . and then chucks up Oxford College an' brings a wench home. . . . An' calls me a mean-'earted, cowardly rough, me that's maintained him and paid his way, an' taught him all I know. . . . My young Bob, that I was goin' to make rich and respected an' shake hands with all the Nobs at the N.S.C., an' Heavy-Weight Champion o' the World an' the White Hope," and William

Bossom, entering suddenly, saw that his master was perturbed, for he was blowing his nose with terrific violence on a crimson bandana handkerchief.

"Any more orders to-night, Sir?" he inquired.

"Yes. You go to 'Ell," was the reply.

"Go to 'Ell it is, Sir," responded Mr. Bossom respectfully, and retired saluting.

As he hurried back to the Station, Otho promised himself that Joe Mummery should have good reason—the best of all reasons—to withdraw his clear and definite statements that Otho was a coward, a cur and an ungrateful swine. Also to change his opinion that Otho had not the heart for fighting as distinct from boxing, and that he was "temperamental." . . . There was no earthly reason to suppose that because a man had a brain and a mind and a love for things of the spirit, he could not also have tremendous physical strength, skill and energy, high courage, and a fierce, dour fighting nature.

Joe Mummery was the Champion Heavy-Weight of England and in his prime. If getting oldish for a Champion, he had the more experience and knowledge of ringcraft.

His Championship had not been challenged for a long time, nor did there seem any probability of its being challenged. . . . Very good. . . . While Joe Mummery was undisputedly and admittedly the Heavy-Weight Champion of England, left in unchallenged possession of his laurels, and admittedly supreme, he, Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême would challenge him—and beat him too.

Joe would then see exactly to what extent his despised and rejected protégé was cowardly, unreliable, temperamental and lacking in heart for real fighting. . . .

"I'll take his Championship," he said. "*'I Saye and I Doe'*" . . . and from soaring visions of a mighty fight and a glorious victory, he fell suddenly to earth.

Victoria! What on earth was he to do with her?

What an unspeakably silly fool he had been—head-long, head-strong and rash as usual. . . . A childish, unpractical, romantic . . .

What was he to do? Keep his word anyhow and at any cost. . . .

All very well building noble castles in the air and making plans for his future rehabilitation and glory. Better if he could build a hut for the present sheltering of this poor, unhappy girl.

CHAPTER XI

AS Otho hurriedly turned the corner and into the Station approach, he collided heavily with a bulky man.

"'Ere! 'Ere!" wheezed this person. "Don' knock me down, Mister! 'It one your own size. . . . An' if it was your fault, I beg my pardon. . . ."

"Pug!" ejaculated Otho. "How are you, Mr. Pounder?"

"Bob!" cried Mr. Pounder delightedly. "'Ow are you, Mr. Blame? . . . Bob wot's grown up to be a scholard and a gent! . . . That Oxford and Cambridge fight come off yut—as Joe Mummery says is the first fight that's going to take you to Championship honours? . . . Joe's proper proud of you, Bob—an' no wonder. . . . Well, well, well! . . . Too fine a gentleman to come an' 'ave one with ole Pug Pounder, Bob? . . . An' when you coming down to put 'em on at my Travellin' Wonderland, *Pug Pounder's Perrypertetic Poogilists' Parrydise,* like we uster talk about you doin' soon as you was big enough?"

"Now," replied Otho, who had had an idea, and was prompt to turn thought to action.

"Come and have a talk, Pug," he said. "If we can come to terms, I'll join your show at once. You can pay me what you pay your other men, until I have defeated any well-known pro. Then we'll have fresh terms until I am Champion of England. . . . You help me now, and I'll not forget it when I'm Champion of the World."

Pug laughed.

"Goo' boy," he said. "That's 'ow I uster talk, and how all the good useful lads talk—at eighteen, and until they're made to look like three-a'porth o' God-'elp-me, before a big aujence. . . . But I'll jump at the chance of 'aving you in my Show, Bob—an' I don't say you mightn't go far. . . . Come into the Refreshment Rooms 'ere. I just bin in an' 'ad one a'ready. I keeps away from the pubs so's not to meet any o' my lads there. . . . I tells them I don't drink nothink, an' no more mustn't they. . . . Then you come down to-morrow morning, about eleven, an' I'll try you out—

an' we'll sign a contrack then an' there, according to how you shapes, if you shapes satisfact'ry."

"Right, Pug," agreed Otho, "but there's something else. You've just come out of the Refreshment Rooms—and I was just going in there. Did you notice a fair-haired girl in the corner, near the fireplace?"

"Did I not!" replied Mr. Pounder warmly. "Settin' in there all alone, drinkin' in that bar! . . . There was a time, Bob, when I sh'd a give 'er the glad eye an' a port-an'-lemon. . . . It's a shame though—a clean-lookin' country lass like that! . . . Wot'll she be like five year 'ence, eh?"

"Look here, Pug," interrupted Otho, "I brought her here, this evening, from Oxford."

"Strike me purple!" ejaculated Mr. Pounder. "'Ow the young 'uns do grow up! . . . Seems only the other day you was a schoolboy."

"Listen," said Otho sharply, "and try to get this. I brought her here intending to take her home. She needs shelter and kindness. My people won't have her. I caught her trying to commit suicide, and promised her I'd look after her, if she'd swear not to do it. . . . She's no more to me than she is to you, except for that promise. . . . Can you help me? . . . Lend me a hand now, and you'll never regret it, Pug."

"'Ere, let's go an' set down," interrupted Mr. Pounder. "I ain't quite took it in. What about the Briggses—or Joe Mummery. . . . 'E's got a woman livin' there now, 'ouse-keepin' for 'im. 'Is ole mate Bossomseses' wife."

Otho explained.

They entered the Refreshment Room and saw Victoria, sound asleep in her corner.

"Real prime little piece!" observed the pugilist. "Nice a bit o' skirt as ever I see. . . . Oh, you young rascal! . . ." and he dug Otho painfully in the ribs, with an air of sly and envious congratulation.

Otho sighed once again.

The two sat at the table next to Victoria's, and Otho ordered beer for Mr. Pounder and food and coffee for himself. And then, without apparent success, he endeavoured to give Mr. Pounder an appreciation of the true state of affairs—and to make him grasp the fact that the girl was nothing but a deluded victim, and himself nothing worse

nor better than a foolish young man who had "butted in" with the best intentions and, so far, the worst results.

"Now then, Mr. Pounder," he concluded, "if you want a good man to work for you—and I could take on any of your lot one-handed, can you do anything for me and Miss Bate?"

"Wot sort of 'anything'?" queried Mr. Pounder.

"Tell me where I could find a lodging for her, for one thing, until, until . . ." he began.

"Yus. Until," said Mr. Pounder. "It ain't everywheres that'll take 'em *'until.*' . . . Not those places as you'd care to put a decent lass as had come by trouble. . . . No. . . . What was you thinkin' of payin', might I ask?"

"I hadn't thought about that," replied Otho, "but I am going to screw enough out of you to be able to keep her in decent comfort, until . . ."

"M'm," mused Mr. Pounder. "Can't she work? . . . Same work as you took her from?"

"I suppose not," replied the boy uncomfortably. "Not for long, anyhow. . . . And it wouldn't be quite fair—either to her employer or to herself. . . . Oh, hell."

"M'm," pondered Mr. Pounder. "For a gel in 'er position there is the Work'us Infirmary, there's 'Omes for the Fallen, an' there's White Slave traps into which they goes and never comes out."

"And I don't propose that she shall go into any of the three," said Otho. "Have another glass, and think again."

Mr. Pounder accepted both suggestions.

"It 'ud be easier, o' course, if you was goin' in double-'arness with the young party," he observed, after allowing this fourth glass of beer to assist its predecessors in clarifying his thoughts and stimulating his brain. "Furnished lodgings for a respectable married couple and use of kitching-range. . . . Or I c'd find you a caravan while we're in Tonbury."

"We don't happen to be married," observed Otho.

"Lots o' people ain't," returned Mr. Pounder with apparent irrelevance. "Why not put some money in her lap an' clear out?" he suggested, and added: "'Ere, don't look at me like that! I'm on'y tryin' to 'elp, ain't I? . . . I'd have subscribed somethink too. . . . You ain't respontsible for 'er—accordin' to your tale."

"Turn what brain you have on to this fact, Mr. Pounder,"

said Otho. "I have promised to see her into safety. She'll certainly commit suicide if she's left to herself. I have promised to help her and I keep my promises. Why I mentioned her to you at all, was because I want to join your show, and I can't do so until I have placed her somewhere —somewhere suitable and decent—where I can look after her until she can start life again on her own, and earn her living."

"Yus—an' you turn what brain you got on to this fack, Mr. Blame," responded the old prize-fighter, "you can't keep a gel like that in a place like Tonbury—without the worst sort of trouble, both for 'er an' for you. 'Oo's goin' to believe a word you say? . . . Not a livin' soul! . . . Not your own Mother! You won't get the credit for your kindness of 'eart, me lad, but you'll get all the credit for what the other bloke done—if there is any other bloke!"

"You don't really believe what I have told you, then?" asked Otho.

"Not a word, son," replied Mr. Pounder and emptied his glass.

"It's a nice clean decent world, isn't it?" observed Otho in despair. "A charitable kindly Christian world!"

"Oh, the world's all right," said Mr. Pounder. "It's the people in it what's wrong. You got to live accordin' to the way they thinks, an' if you don't, you got to put up a reasonable pretence o' doing so—or else there's trouble.

"You take it from me, Bob," he went on, eyeing his empty glass with philosophical mournfulness, "you got to do one of three things. . . . You got to marry this gel; or you got to pretend you've married 'er; or you've got to 'op it an' leave 'er in the lurch. . . . Nothink else for it."

The arrival and sampling of another glass of beer gave Mr. Pounder one more bright thought.

"Or," he added, "you got to pretend you're goin' to marry 'er. . . . Say you're walkin' out with 'er, like. . . . You gotter do one of them five things, or else look for trouble—for both of you, especially the gel."

"I only counted four," said Otho, "and you can wash out about three of them."

"Now if I was to go and say she was your wife or your intended, I c'd take 'er 'ome with me now, an' try 'er on my missis. . . . She's a kind-'earted old geeser, but frightful

pertickler. She won't have no servant 'cept she's an ugly old 'ag, and she's a blue-blind teetotaller. Still, for a woman 'oo 'as got 'igh principles, I will say she has got a kind 'eart. . . . She's Scotch and unaccountable."

"Would she believe my perfectly true story?" asked Otho.

"Not a word of it, boy. So don't try it on 'er. She ain't no fool, if she is a teetotaller. . . . Leave it to me. . . . I'll fix it if you let me handle the business—and I reckon that'll about cover your wages, young Bob!"

"I'll work for you for nothing, so long as Victoria is your wife's lodger and well-treated—and I will thank you to my dying day, Pug."

"Well—you 'elp me to my dying day, an' that'll be enough —but I'll have to tell my missis that she's your gel an' all's fair an' above-board and that you're workin' for me in return for 'er keep. . . . An' you'll 'ave to come along too. . . . Don't want the ol' gel to think I'm gorn gay an' brought 'ome a Light o' the 'Arem, to be 'er 'and-maiden, like I was ole Abram, Isaac, David an Solomon all rolled into one. . . . I must say you're goin' to marry 'er. . . ."

Otho in exasperation, sprang to his feet and walked over to the counter.

Victoria suddenly sat up—staring wide-eyed at Mr. Pounder.

"Of course he's goin' to marry me," she said gently. "What d'you suppose he brought me away from me home for? I always been respectable, an' Mr. Blame's respectable too. A gentleman like him wouldn't . . ." and she wept afresh.

"Why, o' course, my dear!" Mr. Pounder assured her. "I knowed Mr. Blame all me life. 'E wouldn't bilk nobody. . . . An' now you're comin' 'ome to see my Missis, and 'ave a comferble night's rest," and Mr. Pounder patted Victoria's hand and then squeezed it warmly.

"Oh, I am so tired," moaned Victoria, as Otho returned. "I'm nearly dead. . . . I do want to go to bed."

"We'll have a cab, Bob," announced Mr. Pounder, "an' you can set in it, while I break it to the Missis."

§ 2

Mrs. Pounder quickly grasped her lord's scheme, and saw its subtlety and beauty. By putting this highly-trained and

most promising young boxer—probable future Champion of England, possible Champion of Europe and conceivable Champion of the World—under a deep obligation, and by getting his girl as a hostage for his present faithfulness to Mr. Pounder, a fine stroke of business would be done.

To get a contract made, whereby Otho appointed Mr. Pounder his sole manager; or whereby, in return for present services rendered, he agreed to pay Mr. Pounder a moiety of his "purses," gate-money, and general boxing-earnings—would be a good thing, and Mrs. Pounder had a very clear eye for a good thing, whether in the way of boxing or whether in the way of business.

"Get it, Helspeth?" said Elspeth's fairly faithful spouse, after he had laid all things before her.

Elspeth got it. Shrewd, shrivelled, and arid of aspect, she rarely allowed her innocence of the dove to impair her wisdom of the serpent.

"It would mean thousands if he became World Champion and ye had a contract with him as sole Manager and Agent," she said.

"It would, ole gel," agreed Mr. Pounder, "and it's bound to mean 'undreds, and pretty early on, too."

"What's troublin' the lad?" asked Mrs. Pounder, after a minute's silent cogitation. "Nothing sinfu', I trust."

"Oh—bit of 'anky-panky, I s'pose. . . . Boys will be boys, an' so'll gels for the matter o' that. . . . The boy's quarrelled with his family about her, an' with Joe Mummery too,—by a stroke of luck for me. . . . 'E can't marry 'er until he's earned a trifle, an' I mean all he earns to go in 'er keep, see? . . . Longer she's 'ere, the better. . . . I'm goin' to tell the World I got its future 'Eavy-Weight Champion trainin' in my quarters. . . . 'E'll be a bloomin' gold-mine."

"He is going to marry the lass all right, of course?" asked Mrs. Pounder. "I won't lend my countenance to any wickedness."

Mr. Pounder endeavoured to imagine any wickedness wishing to borrow it.

"Why of course he is," he stoutly averred. "I never knew a straighter lad than young Bob Blame. . . . 'Course 'e'll marry 'er. . . . I tell you 'e don't know enough to bilk a blinder. . . . Why, I wouldn't 'ardly mind if I never 'ad

no written contrack with 'im, once 'e give me 'is word, plain an' clear."

"Don't you talk like an auld fule, Mr. Pounder," adjured his lady. . . . "Let's have a look at the lass. . . . If she's a Scarlet Wummun of Jerusalem she's not coming in here."

"She ain't a Jewess," affirmed Mr. Pounder simply, and added, "And I b'lieve they're the straightest gels in the world, if she was."

§ 3

As Otho sat in the damp, malodorous cab, outside the dingy residence of Mr. Pounder, he was what is chastely termed, "a prey to conflicting emotions."

With Victoria's head resting on his shoulder, her hand thrust confidingly into his, and her nose giving vent to pathetic sniffs and snuffles, he was vouchsafed a new and sudden glimpse of the strength and might of that terrific power known as the Force of Circumstances.

He had "loosed an act upon the Universe," and one result of this act was that he sat thus in this cursed hearse, while a cunning, coarse, good-hearted old bruiser beguiled his wife with some tale which would induce her to accept this strange girl—strange to him as to her—as a sojourner beneath her roof . . . and to give his wife the impression that the girl was the bride, or the betrothed, of him who thus deposited her to be left until called for.

Anyhow, he couldn't walk the streets till morning with Victoria, nor go knocking from door to door, nor deposit her for the night in the Police-Station, in the Railway Waiting Room, nor on a seat in the justly famous Tonbury Recreation Grounds. Nor could they sit all night in this foul cab. And if they could do any or all of these absurdities, what of the morrow? "To-morrow is another day," no doubt; and, "Joy cometh with the morning" (sometimes), but the problem of the disposal of Victoria would still remain for solution.

He had no intention of playing any mean trick on Mrs. Pounder, nor of cheating nor deceiving her—but if Pug gave her the impression that a new and very promising employee needed a temporary home for his "young lady," —well—Otho was not going to lose this last chance by calling Pug a liar. Rather would he rise up and call him blessed.

He could deal gently with Victoria's possible delusions later on.

Pug emerged from the house, and on the door-step, Otho was privileged to behold Mrs. Pounder.

"'Op out and come in, Miss," said Mr. Pounder, and received Victoria's box from the very willing hands of the cabman—who observed that he was stricken if he were not encarnadined-well froze, sittin' there by the purple hour, and was assured by Mr. Pounder that but a few more years should roll, a few more seasons pass, ere he would find himself where his loud complaints would be of anything but the cold.

Mrs. Pounder received the young couple kindly, if not warmly. She was of Scottish descent, and kissed not at the first opportunity, nor blunted her palm with entertainment of each new-hatched unfledged comrade. But when Mrs. Pounder's approval was earned and won, she was of those who, in time of their friends' need, grapple them unto their souls with hoops of steel.

But business is business and friendship is friendship, and never the twain should meet to the former's undoing, in Mrs. Pounder's philosophy.

In the tiny "hall" of the tiny house, she took the girl by the shoulders and, under the gas-lamp, turned the young face up and examined it searchingly.

Without comment, she opened the door of the "best parlour," and bade Victoria enter.

"Ye can stay in ma hoose as long as ye like, lassie," she said, "and, whiles, ye can meet y'r young man in this room when ye can't be walkin' oot wi' him. . . . Ye'll have a clean and airy room of y'r own—and ye'll keep it clean, and ye'll not burrrn the gas in it after ye go to bed. . . . And if ye like to offer to gie me a light hand wi' the hoosework, I'll no be affronted. . . ."

Mr. Pounder then entering the room and presenting Otho, she eyed him long and steadily.

"Y'r lassie will be safe here, young man," she said. "And I hope Mr. Pounder'll find he's made a good barrrgain by ye."

"I'll be grateful to him, and to you, all my life," Otho assured her fervently, and on her observing:

"Ah weel! Promise is a fine dog and Perforrmance is a better," he said:

"Then get two kennels quickly, for you have a brace of good dogs coming to you, Mrs. Pounder," which brought a faint twitch to her thin lips, almost like the shadow of a smile.

When he had gone and Victoria had been taken to the attic box-room, which was the "clean and airy room" of Mrs. Pounder's reference, that lady observed to her husband:

"Yon's a fine laddie, John Poonder. Treat him well and ye'll never regret it in y'r mind nor y'r pocket. . . . The lass I'm not so sure aboot—but she's clean, and she may be honest. . . . She's young. . . . But what's he doing with such a cottage lass? . . . Why—their very speech is different! . . . 'Tis well his face was his passport, or I'd not have had her here."

CHAPTER XII

OTHO slept that night in a clean and respectable house, in the front window of which a card bore the legend: *Furnished Rooms.*

Of the Furnished Rooms, one was a small but protean apartment, which in its time played many parts, and with the moving of a "Fairy" gas-stove rather than a fairy wand, changed from a kitchen to a drawing-room, and was equally comfortable in the rôle of dining-room, bed-sitting-room, library, scullery, study or dressing-room.

The other was frankly and firmly a bedroom, for it was room for a bed, and nothing else—or so at least it seemed to Otho's weary eye, when its door was opened and its interior appeared to be wholly occupied by a vast double bed.

There must have been other articles of use and ornament, but before him stretched a bed that seemed to resemble the bed of the ocean in the illimitability of its extent, and his soul and body utterly yearned for it.

> " 'Unbeginning endless sea,
> Let me launch myself in, or on, thee,'

as Mr. Wordsworth, I think, says, Mrs.—Madam," he observed to the somewhat suspicious lady who stood at his elbow. . . . "Sea of Time, River of Lethe, Waters of Oblivion. . . . Yes, Whisky-and-water of Oblivion. . . . I'll take it Mrs.—Madam, or it shall take me, rather."

"Both rooms goes together," began Mrs. Freke.

"I'm sure they do," agreed Otho. "Never been parted yet."

"Both rooms goes together," repeated Mrs. Freke patiently, "an' two meals a day an' twenty-six shillings a week."

"All go together in a happy family, I go with them, eh?" agreed Otho. "Splendid. We shall love it."

"'Oo's we'?" interrupted Mrs. Freke.

"The two rooms and the two meals and the twenty-six shillings and I. . . . Excuse my yawning like that, Mrs.—Madam, but I haven't been to bed for two years come Michael-

mas, whenever that is, and I am quite sleepy. Thank you so very, very much, and good night, dear Madam," and another irrepressible yawn cut short the flow of eloquence which indicated frayed nerves and a disgruntled sub-conscious.

Otho shook his head and smiled deprecatingly, when his mouth at length closed again. He turned and extended his hand for the candle, which Mrs. Freke held at an angle of sixty degrees to the perpendicular, and got his first clear glimpse of her.

He beheld a very gaunt, flat, angular woman with coal-black hair, brown face, heavy black eyebrows, a small and thin and unkempt moustache, and odd eyes—odd both by reason of their oddity, and of their being odd.

Their oddity lay in their curious shape, angle and colour, due to Eurasian or negroid blood, and their oddness in their difference one from the other.

If the right one was her proper eye—so to speak—then she had an odd eye beside it. If the left were the true and genuine eye that went with her face, then the right was an odd one that she had somewhere collected.

Unlike the two rooms they did not go together—save in so far as they unavoidably went where Mrs. Freke went—but operated independently like Allied Generals.

Noting this, Otho, pleased and interested despite his overwhelming fatigue, privately murmured:

"Her right eye knoweth not what her left eye see-eth."

Mrs. Freke's whole face was decidedly fascinating and Otho gazed upon it duly fascinated.

"Nosso fast, young fella!" remonstrated Mrs. Freke as his hand closed on the candlestick. "I ain't seen the colour of your money. . . . You come here late at night, either drunk or sober, without no luggage; you talks strange, and you takes my rooms without scrape o' pen or sight o' cash. . . . I've been had before."

"How incredible and shocking!" murmured Otho.

Pulling himself together, he produced Great-Grandpapa's little handful of gold.

One of Mrs. Freke's eyes wavered to and fro like a wandering searchlight and then fell into focus upon the money with an inaudible click. The other, in marked detachment, even in the presence of gold, circled awhile as though projecting a ring-pattern of light upon the ceiling, and then came sud-

denly and disconcertingly to rest, and concentrated its bright beam on Otho's ear.

"Take two of these, dear Mrs.—Madam," he said, "and thus we shall be happy together for one unforgettable week, and you'll have fourteen shillings in hand for—er—stay of execution, or *ex parte* statement, or statute of limitations, or Statue quo Auntie, or . . ."

"Balance," snapped Mrs. Freke. "I'll keep it for you . . ." and extended avid fingers.

"Thank you so much," agreed Otho. "Balance. . . . You'll keep my balance—and your own. . . . Then we won't be sad nor mad nor bad, but oh, how it will be nice—to get to bed," and another terrific yawn seized him.

"I'll give you a receip' in the morning, Sir," said Mrs. Freke, smiling mouthfully, while one eye frowned upon her new lodger, and the other gazed fondly upon the two sovereigns in her hand, "and I won't call you until you wakes up and the water-works is across the landing and me name's Mrs. Freke and not Mrs. Maddum."

"Mrs. *Freke!*" mumbled Otho, with his last remaining strength and consciousness. "No? How truly—er—yes. Good night, Mrs. Freke. How truly-glad I am I found you, I was going to say."

§ 2

When he had breakfasted next morning, and found Mrs. Freke's provision no worse than that of Mrs. Thynne, Otho made his way to the house of Mr. Pounder.

He had decided, while dissecting his grizzly, gristly breakfast sausage, that his first duty was, in the circumstances, to Victoria; and that, having visited her and then satisfied Mr. Pounder of his fitness for employment as, at any rate, one of the "Let-em-all-come" lads of his boxing-booth, he would then go to see his mother. He might, or might not, visit Joe Mummery thereafter, and tell him that, although he wanted nothing from him but justice and reconciliation, he was terribly hurt to think that he had hurt Joe, and most troubled and depressed at Joe's treatment of him—his harsh judgment of his inexcusably idiotic conduct.

He would say, "Joe, I'd sooner lose anything than your friendship and affection—though I'll never accept another

farthing from you, of course, now that I have let you down."

Perhaps Joe would believe him, make friends again, and relieve his heart of this aching misery that Joe should think him ungrateful, unreliable, dishonest, worthless.

Arrived at Mr. Pounder's little house, Otho found the family at breakfast in a small room, that caused the impish elf, that dwelt unsleeping in Otho's mind, to murmur "Home for lost bloaters. . . . The Bloatus Eaters. . . . Pug has a bloatered countenance," simultaneously with Otho's own vocal murmurs of greeting.

Victoria, looking intensely discomfortable and self-conscious, sat munching, cow-like; masticating, phlegmatic; chewing, ruminant. She brightened a little as Mr. Pounder, fork in hand, ushered Otho from the front-door to the back-kitchen.

"Good morrrn, young man," said Mrs. Pounder and, for long, confined her conversation to those words.

"Goo' morning, Sir," said Victoria, and followed Mrs. Pounder's example.

Mr. Pounder made up for the poor practice of the ladies, by talking incessantly while he ate. His conversation was of business, the business of bruising and of being bruised. He was distinctly enthusiastic.

"I'll get a match for you with Young Bridgers, or Kid McKee for a start," he announced. "They're both shapin' well for a look-in at the N.S.C."

"Suppose ye wait till he's done something wi' y'r ain lot, an' not blether sae rashly," observed Mrs. Pounder in restraint of her lord's foolish Southron babblings. "And suppose ye talk sense. . . . D'ye think Young Bridgers or Kid McKee wad look at an unknown lad wi'oot a penny to bless himself. . . . Where's the money coming from to make them fight? . . . Ye'll no venture a penny piece yerself, mind ye, ma mannie, until I've seen him at work. . . . Not but what I like the looks of him—for he's got bone and brisket, long reach and good neck, an' I sense a something aboot him. . . . He'd be quicker and stronger than Young Bridgers and he'd be cleverer than Kid McKee, by his looks. . . . Though Kid McKee's no fule, I'm tellin' ye . . . an' he carries a punch in both hands, an's a fairy on his toes for a' his thirteen stone . . ." and, in the course of this interview, Otho dis-

covered that the lady was an encyclopædic compendium of boxing lore, knowing the records of all living pugilists of note, and the details of all their battles.

By the time that Mr. Pounder had put on his collar, in front of the mirror that adorned the kitchen mantelpiece, Otho was conscious of an uneasy feeling that a retired and withered professional Referee sat before him, masquerading in female garb.

Mr. Pounder did not add to his collar the inutile decoration of a tie, the day not being Sunday.

Taking his bowler hat from its resting-place beneath the dresser, he announced that his wife might expect him to dinner at one, sharp—and that Otho would accompany him, if in condition so to do.

"I was aboot to invite him when ye butted in, premature as usual, from y'r birrrth up, Mr. Poonder," said the lady of the house, and turning to Otho inquired the number of his teeth.

"Thirty-two, ma'am," he stated.

"Then if ye still ha'e thirrty-two at dinner-time, bring them roond here, an' I'll welcome every one of them," she said; and to her husband:

"Gi'e him three rounds wi' Sailor Harris, an' offer Harris a poond if he can knock him oot. . . . Then three wi' the lad Sturge, an' offer him ten shillings if he's not knocked out. . . . An' then let Maclehose loose on him for a roond or twa—an' bid this laddie look to himsel'."

"Just what I was agoin' to do, ole gal," roared Mr. Pounder, smiting his thigh in high admiration of his wife's acumen.

"It's what ye are going to do, anyhow, ma mannie," drily replied Mr. Pounder's much better half, and announced that if Otho acquitted himself well there would be further Labours of Hercules before him ere a contract was behind him.

She then herself went forth to shop, offering also to "Call yon Maclehose an' bid him take Sturge and Sailor Harris to the hall and to hurry."

§ 3

Pug Pounder's Pugilists' Peripatetic Paradise, temporarily at rest in Tonbury, appeared singularly unattractive, with-

out and within, in the cold light of day, whatever might be its allure by night, when brilliantly illuminated and filled with the fair young faces of the followers of the Fancy.

An unusually large building, of the mission-hall type, with a roof of corrugated iron, it afforded seating space for a considerable number of people and for a central, raised, twenty-four-foot ring.

At eleven o'clock of a cold wet morning, there was reason for the spirit in which Otho's imp remarked:

> "'The lights are fled, (don't blame them),
> The garlands dead, (enough to kill them too),
> And all but I departed,' (lucky devils)."

and further added:

> "'The bat and owl repose
> Where once the people knelt them
> And high Te Deum rose.'"

even as Otho himself confirmed the proud Mr. Pounder's opinion that it was a Magnificent Home of True Sport.

As Otho went on to assure its owner that he was ready, willing and able to take on the three boxers who were to "see what he was made of," the imp was saying quite loudly:

"'The bat and owl repose.' . . . Yes, you'll get such a bat that you'll 'owl and then repose—for a count of ten."

A terrible japing imp given to irreverence and the vilest punning.

Ere Mr. Pounder had finished displaying the beauties of the hall, there entered three men whose general appearance was unattractive. Large peaked caps pulled well down over low foreheads, coat collars turned well up around thick necks, and a lack of any suggestion of linen, shaving, washing, and boot-cleaning, combined to put them at a disadvantage in critical eyes.

Otho gravely feared and uncomfortably felt that, beside his new colleagues, he looked a "torf," which is a dreadful thing to look.

"Noo chum," announced Mr. Pounder, indicating Otho by pointing with his chin. "Name o' Bob Blame."

The colleagues regarded their new chum in silence and without change of their expressionless facial expression. Six eyes regarded him with hostile coldness.

"The Old 'Un's Sailor Harris. . . . Gettin' a bit past 'is work. . . . Booze," said Mr. Pounder, nodding toward a man of about forty-five.

The Old 'Un affected deafness.

"The Thick 'Un's Maclehose. . . . Thinks 'e knows a lot o' things 'e don't know. . . . 'Ow to box, f'r example," continued Mr. Pounder, indicating an extremely powerful-looking thick-set man, who growled inarticulately in reply.

"The Young 'Un's Sturge," Mr. Pounder concluded. "'E might be somethink, some day,—if nobody don't kill 'im first."

The Young 'Un, a red-headed craggy-faced youth, spat thoughtfully.

"Now then—don't waste the day jabberin' like this. Get into your workin' kit, an' bring a set o' four-ounce gloves, you, Ted," continued Mr. Pounder.

"You can borrow a pair o' gym shoes, Bob, an' a belt, an' git down to it in your vest and trousies for once," and the boxers retired to where in a corner of the hall, a door opened into a small annex, used as a dressing-room, waiting-room and store.

A few minutes later, Otho found himself sitting facing the Old 'Un, in the ring.

Dressed in a kind of bathing-suit, the Old 'Un looked extremely hard, tough and strong. His face was more like that of a pugilist than are most pugilists' faces, extensive and permanent damage having been done to nose, ears, eyes and lips, none of which could ever have been remarkable for delicacy of finish.

He looked sad and weary, and as though life, for him, held nothing of interest, hope or promise. Otho anticipated an encounter with something like a heavy machine, as mechanical and stereotyped in action, and as difficult to hurt with the human hand.

"Ready?" inquired Mr. Pounder. "I'll give you a three-minute round. . . . And you won't get that quid on a foul, you, Sailor Harris, mind yer. I'll fine you one, more like. . . . Right!

"Time."

Otho rose, extended his hands, touched those of Sailor Harris in the sketch of a hand-shake and lightly dodged the

swift upper-cut which Harris aimed at him, exactly as Otho had anticipated, almost as part and parcel of the hand-shake. As Otho moved his head, his right hand shot out with tremendous force upon the Old 'Un's "mark," producing not only a grunt from that gentleman, but a look of almost respectful surprise.

Otho sprang back and, in some small fraction of a second, summed up his man, stated his problem and its solution, and outlined his strategy and tactics.

In the first place he decided that his man was not one whom it would be rewarding to smite upon the face. To such treatment he would never respond encouragingly. His head was solid bone to the centre, his features carved from teak.

Mr. Pounder had kindly promised the fellow a pound—of Otho's—if he knocked Otho out, therefore the aggressive would be his policy. Otho, intending not only to avoid being knocked out, but clearly and definitely to win the little contest, must himself not only adopt a similar aggressive policy, but must adopt it sooner, harder and more continuously than would his opponent. . . . And, moreover, his tactics pursuant to this strategy must be those of the body-blow and in-fighting.

In the same second, Sailor Harris rushed—impelled, by the promise of a whole pound, from his usual lethargy and heavy, clumsy opportunism.

Otho met him with a straight out-reaching left, a hard and jolting blow, and in the second of impact he dropped beneath the arms of Sailor Harris and again brought a tremendous right upon his "mark."

Springing up, almost in the act of striking, and finding his opponent's head bent unprotected toward him, he swung the weight of his body into a very heavy drive at the point of Harris's jaw.

To his unbounded astonishment, the powerful, ape-like pugilist sagged at the knees, swayed and fell inert.

Otho stepped back and stared in amazement. . . . The fight hadn't begun. He had only hit the man twice on the "mark" and once on the point of the jaw—and that only in the way of business as it were, and not with any concentrated violence. . . . Was the man shamming? . . . Hardly likely, since he was fighting for a pound as well as his own self-

respect. . . . Otho became conscious of the fact that Mr. Pounder was counting Sailor Harris out.

. . . "Ten . . . OUT," concluded Mr. Pounder, and with a loud snort, gave copious expression to his violent disgust.

Turning to the thoughtful-looking Messrs. Maclehose and Sturge, who sat in the front row and in motionless silent taciturnity, he bade them rise up, bestir themselves and sling the bleeding carcass of Sailor Harris out of the blood-stained ring.

His speech must have been metaphorical, for Sailor Harris was not bleeding and the ring was immaculate.

Ere his orders could be carried out, Sailor Harris awoke as it were. His legs twitched sharply. He drew a hand across his face. . . . Anon he sat up.

"Oh! Good mornin', Mr. 'Arris. . . . Thinkin' of gettin' up, was you?" observed Mr. Pounder pleasantly. "Wot would you fancy for brekfus?"

And then with horrid and ferocious scowl and complete change of manner, added:

"Come out of that ring, you miserable old imitation of a prize-fighter's punchin'-ball! . . . Come out of it, you broken-down boozin' old 'as-bin. . . . 'As been?—Never ruddy was, more like. . . . 'Ere, go an' take that kit off, an' clear out of 'ere for good. I'll pay you a week's wages in loo o' notice rather than see your ugly old face again. Go on. Get out."

"In that case I go too, Mr. Pounder," observed Otho, leaning with folded arms on one of the padded posts of the ring.

"Wotcher mean? Who arst you to speak?" sarcastically inquired Mr. Pounder, proud upon his own quarter-deck.

"I mean what I say, and I spoke without being asked," replied Otho. "Kindly remember that I am not yet in your service and have entered into no contract with you. If you dismiss Sailor Harris because I knocked him out, I'll go with him, and will try in some other way to pay the debt which I certainly owe you."

Anger struggled with cupidity for but a brief moment in the capacious bosom of Mr. Pounder.

"We'll talk about that later, my lad," he said, and bade the youth named Sturge to 'op into the ring and show whether he could 'it a dent in a pat o' butter.

"An' don't forgit," added Mr. Pounder, "that he gives you ten bob if 'e can't knock you out in three rounds."

Sturge climbed into the ring, and Sailor Harris climbed out of it, a look of puzzled shame and misery on his sub-human battered face.

As the man dropped lightly to the ground, Otho bent over the ropes and extended his hand.

"Shake hands and no ill-will, old chap," he said. "You get the pound and keep your job, of course. . . . It just happens to be my lucky day."

Sailor Harris, grinning sheepishly, extended his vast right hand, what time he rubbed his nose with the left. He said no word, but in his usually expressionless eye appeared, for a fleeting second, the look that is seen in that of a dog who, expecting a kick, receives a pat and a biscuit. . . .

Sturge sat him down opposite to Otho, and was discovered to be an extremely well-built, powerful-looking young man. He was blest with red hair and, opined Otho, the temperament that goes therewith.

"Ginger for pluck," murmured Otho to himself. "Red hair for red blood and fiery temper. . . . Keep cool and make him hot. . . . I've got to knock him out, have I? . . . Then I won't so concentrate upon doing it that I get knocked out myself, instead. . . . I expect he is of the wild whirlwind sort whose winning fights are always won in the first half-minute of the first round. . . . Gets his man rattled, is all over him like a tornado for twenty seconds, and then knocks him out as the poor feller steps back and eases up to get his wind. . . . Yes—the wild whirlwind. . . . If so, we'll wildly out-whirl him and out-wind him too. . . . We'll see."

On Mr. Pounder's cry of "Time," Sturge leapt from his chair and rushed across the ring, his hands extended to touch those of Otho in perfunctory handshake, and his whole appearance and action suggesting the very simile that Otho had used.

He gave the impression that the second of time that was lost in this conventional courtesy was a loss unbearable, a thwarting and exasperating hindrance intolerable.

The moment that their hands had met, Sturge bounded back as if to gain distance for a rush, a *reculer pour mieux sauter* movement, and then flung himself at Otho like a

panther . . . to be met full between the eyes with a straight terrific left, which sent him staggering back so far and fast that only the ropes saved him from a fall. The ropes swung him inward again, inward against the already waiting Otho, who, without cessation, miss, or mercy, rained upon him a succession of short-arm blows that drummed most devastatingly upon his ribs and "mark."

As Sturge at length got his arms up, and stepped sideways, Otho cross-countered his blow, sent him staggering, and then gave him, ere he could find a steady stance, a vastly improved rendering of his own favourite whirlwind act, at which Otho had guessed so unerringly.

In ten more seconds, Sturge was a winded, gasping, defeated man, guarding wildly, striking more wildly, guarding nothing, striking nothing, until a tremendous drive upon the mouth sent him to the boards.

This time, Mr. Pounder snorted and spat forth his disgust ere beginning the count.

At *Six,* Sturge rolled over, at *Seven,* rose on all fours, at *Eight,* was up on one knee, and at *Nine,* rose groggily to his feet, and stood swaying.

Otho turned to Mr. Pounder.

"Isn't it about *Time?*" he asked.

"No, it ain't," roared the scandalised Mr. Pounder. "Mine your own business. You ain't time-keeper, are you? You ain't up there to make a sanguinary speech. Go an' knock that ruddy novice out, before you 'as so much to say."

Otho went over to where Sturge stood, a badly beaten man, dazed, weak and brave—waiting patiently like the tethered bullock in the slaughter-house for the inevitable blow that should smash him to oblivion. . . . Pain. . . . Humiliation. . . . Professional loss.

He swayed again and then, crouching behind his shaking arms, glared fiercely at his conqueror.

Otho extended his hand:

"Jolly good round, old chap," he said.

Sturge did his duty as he knew it, and punched feebly at Otho's face. Otho caught his hands laughingly, and turning to the again scandalised Mr. Pounder, shouted:

"Call *'Time,'* and give him a rest—or else send up your third man."

But Sturge would have none of it.

"Fight it out, you blasted clever-neck," he panted, and this time the blow that he aimed at Otho had some force in it. He was clearly regaining strength, and that quickly.

Otho decided to box him lightly and gently until *"Time"* was called, and proceeded to give an exhibition of cool and perfect defence, without returning a blow.

By the time the signal was given, Sturge was almost himself again, but, as he retired to his chair, Otho informed Mr. Pounder that this particular contest would not continue unless that gentleman gave at least five minutes' interval.

"'Oo is runnin' this blomin' show? You or me?" inquired the again scandalised Mr. Pounder.

"Oh, you, within limits," replied Otho—"and I'll fix the limits."

And, since Mr. Pounder desired to engage Otho quite as much as Otho desired to be engaged by Mr. Pounder, it was so.

After five minutes' rest, Sturge appeared to be as fresh as ever, and, on the word *Time,* projected himself upon Otho like a human cannon-ball, aiming as he did so, a tremendous left, with all the weight of his body behind it.

But even as he reached the spot where his fist should have met Otho's face, Otho's body dropped at the knees as though his legs had been cut from under him, and Sturge's fierce rush was stayed by a terrific right-arm blow fairly upon the unfortunate boxer's mark.

Powerful, tough, and plucky lad as he was, the stroke defeated him, and he staggered back, gasping with crowing whooping inhalations, and leant in great distress against a post.

Otho stood and waited.

"Finish 'im, will you?" shouted Mr. Pounder.

"No, I won't," replied Otho, and added in parody of Mr. Pounder: "'Oo's fightin' this bloomin' fight? You or me?"

A minute later, Sturge straightened up, again a beaten man. He put up his fists and shuffled forward, the light of battle in his bold but suffering eye.

"Throw up the sponge," said Otho.

And in reply Sturge attacked with a feeble ferocity.

Again Otho played lightly, defended himself, and forbore to put any weight into his blows.

At the end of the round, he informed Mr. Pounder that

he could send up his third gladitor, or consider the proceedings at an end.

Sturge, grumbling and growling fiercely, left the ring at a nod from Mr. Pounder, and Maclehose took his place. Studying this man carefully, Otho decided that Mr. Pounder had kept the best for the last.

Paying attention first, as was his wont, to the face and head of his opponent, Otho saw that here was a specimen of the true fighting type; nor was the opinion based upon the fact of the face being obviously that of a pugilist by reason of its battered condition, its broken nose, thickened ears, and many scars. It was the face of a man born for fighting, no matter if he had never fought in his life. The tremendous neck; the tremendous jaw; the face, apparently of solid bone; every line and angle, the whole shape and expression, were those of the fierce aggressive human animal, brave, ruthless, and unflinching.

From the smallish head and great neck, the shoulders sloped, with the slope that indicates power, to the mighty knotted muscles of the arms and chest.

Beautifully formed and very powerful legs supported a body as surprisingly narrow in the hips as it was broad above them.

And what particularly interested Otho, were the man's eyes—those cold, implacable, unemotional eyes that are almost colourless, and whose every look is sinister and baleful; eyes that were never the windows of a soul that had the warmth to make them glow with any fine, kindly or generous sentiment; sinister eyes, reminding one of the eyes of sinister creatures—crocodiles, sharks, snakes, predatory beasts, birds and fishes.

"This is a dangerous customer," decided Otho. "Him will I assuredly knock out, for if there is anything in a face—and I believe there is everything in a face—this gentleman never spared man, woman nor child, nor denied himself the use of any foul trick. He is a dull deceiver. I will be a gay deceiver, and just a little more deceptive than . . ."

"Time!" shouted Mr. Pounder.

Otho rose to meet his man. Having touched hands, the two fell back and took up each his boxing attitude.

To Otho, Mr. Maclehose presented nothing but the top of his head and the fronts of his gloves.

Crouched forward, with his face at an angle of forty-five degrees to the floor, he apparently looked upward through his eyebrows, and saw all that he needed to see. With his face thus tucked away out of danger, his fists one on either side of it, his great arms like a shield on either side of him, he advanced, slowly, cautiously, remorselessly upon Otho, like a huge and terrible crab endowed with human understanding.

"Can he see my face?" thought Otho, "or is he staring at my knees? . . . a straight left on top of his head will hurt me more than him. . . . This is a box of tricks. . . . We must open it carefully. . . . Anyhow he is absolutely giving away his very useful height and reach . . ." and warily watching, Otho slowly retreated and led Mr. Maclehose on, that he might declare himself.

Mr. Maclehose did so.

As soon as Otho was apparently about to be entrapped in a corner, the left and right fists of Mr. Maclehose shot out at Otho's body, with terrific force, much as Otho had expected.

Shot out, but did not arrive, for their course was deflected and their work anticipated, by the swinging slashing uppercut which Otho had kept in readiness for precisely this occasion. It was a blow that would have lifted a less heavy man, or one less firmly planted upon straddled feet, but it shook and jolted its recipient, and jarred every fibre of his body. As his head was knocked upward and backward, and the pale, almost colourless, cruel eyes met Otho's, the latter smashed a tremendous right between them, and bringing a fierce left hook almost simultaneously to the pugilist's jaw, sent him heavily to the boards.

The man was on his feet again before Pug Pounder's watch was snatched from its owner's pocket. . . . On his feet and ready, but not quite the same sinister, dangerous, and incalculable Mr. Maclehose of a minute earlier, for Otho had shaken him badly, both physically and morally, and much more important, had taken his measure, had read him like a book, and clearly seen the solution of the problem which he presented.

Mr. Maclehose was doubtless a terror to those who let him terrorise them, and had a fatal method with those who chose to submit themselves to it.

What he needed, decided Otho, was a little bustling, and not freedom to crawl about like an armoured crustacean until he had you just where he wanted you, and could deal with you direfully.

Yes, a little bustling. . . . A little merry rousing mix-up.

And as Maclehose arose, and was fairly and squarely on his feet, Otho was upon him, quite in the style of the whirlwind Sturge, but very much more so.

Otho was upon him with a spring like that of a tiger upon a buffalo, and, like a tiger, he slashed with terrific force. The unguarded blow landed upon the cruel mouth and was followed instantaneously by a deadly blow at the base of the breastbone, and, as the heavy sturdy Maclehose reeled backward, he was followed step by step and inch by inch, while he vainly sought to retreat as his custom was, beneath the shield of his mighty arms.

But his opponent, the first man who had ever frightened him and given him the feeling that the battle was lost ere well begun, was within his shield. This man who appeared to combine the slipperiness of the eel, the darting activity of a swallow, the striking power of a horse's hind leg, the ring-craft and cleverness of a great champion, was between him and his hands.

As he vainly beat the air behind his assailant, his own mark and ribs were suffering an incessant rain of the most terrible short-arm jabs that he had ever suffered or seen delivered. . . . Suddenly, Otho changed his tactics with a tremendous upper-cut and stepping back, delivered a beautifully timed and terribly heavy drive at the front and side of the prognathous jaw.

Despite the shortness and thickness of his neck, Maclehose's head was driven backward and was almost the first part of his body to reach the boards.

This time, Mr. Pounder did not withdraw his watch from his pocket. Instead, he observed to the circumambient air:

"Somebody count a thahsand an' when he comes to—if 'e ever do—tell 'im 'e ain't won the fight. . . . Some narsty novice came an' 'it 'im. . . ."

"Here you, Harris and Sturge, fetch some water, sharp," ordered Otho, and proceeded to administer first aid to the knocked-out.

CHAPTER XIII

MR. POUNDER, entering his private abiding-place and the dour desiccated presence of his wife, struck an attitude suggestive of hilarity, rejoicing and triumph; an attitude almost irreverent in its suggestiveness.

And, not content with venturing thus far, Mr. Pounder presumed. He exceeded. Removing his thumbs from the arm-holes of his waistcoat and his bowler hat from the eye that it covered but did not quench, he placed the hat carefully upon the head of the unmoved, unsurprised, unprotesting lady, whose gaze, more critical than approving, wavered not from the face of the junior partner.

"Guess what I got in my pocket, Ginger," he chuckled, his head on one side, the better to admire the picture of his bowler-hatted mistress and to maintain his pose.

"Not the saxpence ye squandered in godless beer ere the full o' noon," guessed Mrs. Pounder correctly.

"Right in wunst, Ma," agreed Mr. Pounder. "Somethink a sight better'n that."

"'Ark!" he continued, advancing on tip-toe with mysterious air, and then giving two sharp raps upon the bowler to increase her will-to-'ark.

"'Ark! I got the Champion 'Eavy-Weight o' the World in me pocket—and 'e's goin' to be worth ten thousand golden jimmy-o'-goblins to us. D'j' see?"

"Aye! I hear, ma mannie. And much o' the like kind o' havers before it. Whit did the laddie dae wi' yon auld Sailor Harris?"

"Knocked him out. Put 'im down fer the count in the first quarter minute. Put 'im to sleep fer a good thirty seconds."

"'Twas a sair dunt did that, I'm thinkin'," pondered Mrs. Pounder. "I'd ha'e said ye'd need a sledge-hammer for the wooden heid o' yon auld Harris. And the Sturge laddie?" she asked.

"Played with him. Bustled him until 'e nearly cried.

Knocked 'im nearly through the ropes—an' then blest if he wouldn't knock 'im out," he said. "I thought 'e was goin' to kiss 'im or wipe 'is nose fer 'im an' give 'im a penny not to cry."

"Worrld Champions arent made frae men who're troubled wi' booels o' compassion," observed Mrs. Pounder.

"No, Ma, you're right there," agreed Mr. Pounder, "but you should 'a' seen Bob Blame's bowels w'en 'e found that his oppersight number was Maclehose. *'Booels o' compassion'* wasn't Bob Blame's strong point then. Bowels o' compassion! It was Tod Maclehose's bowels I was thinking abaht, when Bob Blame started in-fighting. Strike me pink, Ole Party, I don't think I ever see a seasoned pro get his—nor get it so badly an' quickly—as wot Tod Maclehose got it, in a quarter of a round, from this young devil."

"And yon Maclehose is Championship stuff," mused Mr. Pounder's gentle wife. "I ha'e promised myself to see him in the ring wi' the Fighting Frenchman. I did so."

"Well, an' where d'you expect to see the lad—an absoberlutely unknown novice too, mark you—who could take him an' eat 'im before breakfast any day of the week?"

"Worrld's Champion!" replied Mrs. Pounder succinctly.

"Shake 'ands, Ma," said Mr. Pounder in a hushed but vibrant voice, and seizing Ma's hand, he politely raised his hat from Ma's head and strained her to his mighty bosom.

Shortly after, Otho, who had been to his rooms, was admitted by the beaming Mr. Pounder and received by the dourly non-smiling Mrs. Pounder, with what she considered effusion and Otho considered a marked expression of deep distaste.

"Y'r young leddy will be doon in a minute," she informed Otho in the course of preprandial conversation. "She is above, the noo, daeing a wee bit o' useful warrk at what the English rightly call dusting. A willin' lassie. . . . Och aye! She'd finish any job if she had till Doomsday, and would cerrtainly wash up y'r tea-things on some occasions wi'oot breakin' many."

Otho thanked Mrs. Pounder for this liberal testimony to Victoria's merits, and expressed his earnest hope that she would be able to keep the girl until . . . until . . Well, of course,—er—er—until . . .

"Until you can marry 'er," roared Mr. Pounder. "Yus of

course, we'll keep 'er till the 'appy day, an' on'y too pleased," he continued, and therein spoke the sober truth.

"Cerrtainly y'r lassie can bide here, Mr. Blame," concurred Mrs. Pounder. "And I'd be right glad if the two o' ye could see y'r way to mak' y'r home wi' us. I think it could be managed, an' na doot ye'd want to be livin' in a small way while Mr. Pounder is gettin' maatches for ye, an' bringin' ye to the front. . . . I'd dearly love to have ye here," and Mrs. Pounder spoke stark truth, the while her shrewd head guided and approved the sentiments which came doubtless from her heart.

Throughout lunch, or midday dinner, a sordid meal of cold mutton, cold potatoes, cold bread-and-cheese and cold water, Victoria sat dumb and miserable.

When Mrs. Pounder made reference to her supposedly approaching nuptials, she raised her beautiful eyes with a dog-like look of hope and gratitude, to Otho's face.

Otho had looked at his plate, coloured furiously and had bitten back the words, that rose spontaneously to his lips.

How could he reiterate, in the girl's very presence, that she was merely a poor little servant-girl, in trouble, whom he had rashly sworn to help and to save from her own cowardice and hereditary suicidal mania?

The meal finished, Mrs. Pounder announced that the front parlour would be at the disposal of the young people for the afternoon.

To Otho, this seemed a good opportunity for a discussion with Victoria, of many serious and important things, and he suffered himself to be conducted by the ponderously arch Mr. Pounder, who left him and Victoria with bright admonitions "to be good" and "not to set on the best sofa both at once as none of its springs weren't none too good a'ready."

§ 2

The interview left Otho—who, albeit a quixotic superchivalrous romantic, was not wholly and always a fool—in some doubt as to whether Victoria were really quite as simple as she seemed. He could not understand her, and he felt that there was a baffling and confusing play of cross-purposes. There was something here that he could not fathom, and

part of it was her stout refusal to help him to identify her "friend," fiancé, or whatever he was.

Extraordinarily, she seemed a little indignant and distrustful when Otho pressed her to tell him the man's initials, since she did not know his real name.

When he himself became a little indignant and distrustful, and pointed out that the least she could do was to help him to help her, she burst into tears, thanked him for what he had tried to do for her, and promised that he should not be troubled with her for long. . . . She had heard that death by suffocation in the gas-oven was not too painful. . . . A pity there had not been one in Mrs. Thynne's kitchen. Luckily there was one here. . . .

Otho again did his best—somewhat wearily; and again obtained her promise to abstain from suicide, provided he did not abandon her to her fate. On receiving his assurance and re-assurance, she grew more cheerful, amenable and grateful.

But even at the climax of this show of gratitude, no response would the girl give to his question, "Who is the man?" in spite of his repeatedly declaring that he asked only in her own interest and that he might do his best for her.

The discussion led no further than the final clarifying of the situation, which was that Victoria would not commit suicide while Otho faithfully promised "to stick to her" (Victoria's phrase); that something must be done soon; but that Victoria would really die rather than say another word about the man who, as Victoria expressed it, "began it all."

One thing was quite clear. Victoria was infinitely less frightened here, in Tonbury, that she had been at Oxford. Otho acribed this to her escape from the sad service of the baleful Mrs. Thyme, at whose hands any sinner might expect the most malevolent persecution and the fullest measure of punishment, mental and physical, that Mrs. Thynne could possibly mete out. . . . Here, with Mrs. Pounder, Victoria felt safe, safe where her secret was not known, safe where she could be in peace and in hiding until . . .

Thus argued Otho—and suddenly there entered Mr. Pounder, who facetiously knocked on the inner side of the door that he had so suddenly opened. He turned his back to the young couple while he continued his pleasantry, but not before he had been given full opportunity to see Victoria

suddenly throw her arms about Otho's neck, and press her lips passionately to his.

§ 3

On that day, Otho entered upon his career as a professional pugilist, it being proposed that he "appeared" nightly at Mr. Pounder's Pugilists' Peripatetic Paradise, whether at Tonbury or on tour; that he went into strict training for the matches that Mr. Pounder would make for him; that he steadily worked his way up to attain a position in which he could challenge the Heavy-Weight Champion of England; and that, after winning this Championship, he would go for the Championship of Europe and then of the World.

All this time Mr. Pounder would pay him a salary reasonably and rightly sufficient for his maintenance, and for that of Victoria; and, in return, he should hand over to Mr. Pounder a moiety of all his winnings until such time as he was Champion of England.

Thereafter he was to sign a contract drawn up by Mrs. Pounder, provided he found it just ("More just than generous," smiled Otho to himself.)

And, in any event, he gave his solemn word in the presence of Mrs. Pounder, that he would not have any other employer, trainer, principal, agent, representative, nor man of business of any kind, except Mr. Pounder—save in the event of Mr. Pounder's managing his affairs with obvious inability, dishonesty or carelessness. ("I'll watch it, laddie," promised Mrs. Pounder.)

And in conclusion, all kindness was to be shown to Victoria, who was at present to remain with Mrs. Pounder when the Peripatetic Paradise went on tour, as it generally did in the summer, visiting Fair Grounds and other gathering-places of those who cheaply sought out-door diversion in the evenings.

And steadily Victoria grew more serene, more affectionate and grateful, more expectant, more certain that Otho was her true deliverer who would never throw her out into the cold world, now that he had saved her from it.

The next time she endeavoured to embrace him, he gently rebuffed her and did what always reduced her to sulks and tears—asked for the initials of "the man."

They always referred to him as "the man."

And so a month passed, and Otho grew increasingly anxious and worried.

"I Saye and I Doe" was a noble horse, but it had brought its rider to face an awkward leap on this occasion—one of the worst of a lifetime.

And, at what was once "home," his mother was tearfully angry with him for his "wickedness"; his aunt "wondered however he could do such a thing"; his uncle turned away his face—and asked where the young woman was staying; George offered help (Bob had only "to give it a name"); Bert asked how much it cost to keep a bit of fluff; Liz seized him and kissed him and told him he was a silly soft fool who'd find it out before long, too.

When he met Joe Mummery at the Briggs' house, he was made most uncomfortable. For, after their first encounter there, Joe was unaware of him, neither saw nor heard him, and, being directly addressed, affected a deafness greater than that of the Old Pirate.

The first encounter had been painful, for Joe had taken it upon him to remark that for once in his life he wished he was Mr. Briggs and owner of the house, as he could then give himself the pleasure of taking the Dirty Dog, Bob Blame, by the scruff of his neck and the seat of his trousers and flinging him into the gutter.

"But why, Joe?" Otho had asked.

"Oh, nothing, really," Joe had replied. "Nothing, only breakin' your poor mother's heart by goin' to the devil with fancy females; goin' down-hill as hard as you can go; livin' on that second-rate old has-been of a Pug Pounder and his boothful of low swindlin' tricksters; an' being a cowardly fight-sellin' double-crosser, and a dirty ungrateful young hound that ought . . ."

"That's enough, Joe," Otho had interrupted patiently. "We'll see about all that later."

And thereafter, when they met, Joe had ignored him utterly.

The attitude of the Old Pirate had, however, been quite different. Having invited Otho to his room, Captain Hawkins had piped:

"Well, Bob, me boy, you get more an' more like me every day, you do. Godblessyer, me son. . . . I've got a ten-pound

note for you. . . . Lend it you, 'long with the rest. . . . No hurry, Bob, I can manage all right for a bit. . . . I've got no vices now, blow an' blast it. . . . But when I was your age, Bob, I'd bin married either seven or eight times. Very happily too, in mos' cases. So I'm in a persition to say I know less about wimmin than mos' men do. . . . By all I hear, you're takin' after your old Great-Grandfather something surprising, boy. . . . Starting young, too, like me. . . . Yes, either eight or nine of 'em, I married—in different parts."

"Divorced them all, Sir?" the astounded Otho had asked.

"No, boy. . . . I never went to the trouble of doin' that, nor had the time. . . . Got tired of 'em instead. . . . Here to-day and gone to-morrow. . . . Excep' with those Kanaka gels, and then it was here to-day and here again to-morrow. . . . But gels like a change as much as men do. . . . Always ready for a sailor. . . .

"Not that I reckermends matterimony for a landlubber, Bob. . . . People expecks them to stand to it. . . . But have your fling while you're young, Bob. . . . Time's agin you, boy. . . . I haven't bin on the spree, nor had a night ashore like, not for nigh quarter of a century, I haven't. . . . No, not since I kept me seventy-fifth birthday up, for two days and nights. . . .

"Yes, you enjoy yourself while you can, boy. . . . An' a right to it. . . . I tell Joe Mummery he needn't go about with a face like the son of a mouldy sea-boot out of a half-scrubbed hammick, he needn't, the hypocritical young humbug—because I know something about him. . . . He goes quite pale when I say that. . . . An' I tell my Mary to turn off her water-tap, an' *'Oh, dry those tears,'* because she don't want a milk-an'-water nimcompoof for a son—an' what about larks when she was young? . . . Got red in the face she did, an' called me a nasty rude old man, an' said she wondered what on earth I meant—but of course I was too deaf to hear anything. . . .

"It wouldn't surprise me, if anybody were to tell me that Joe Mummery was your father, me lad, an' a damn good job too. . . . Better a live sailor than a dead Dook. . . ."

Otho had left the old reprobate, and, while ruefully smiling, had wondered whether there was much point in his continuing to visit the house for the time being.

CHAPTER XIV

ON a glorious afternoon, a month or so later, Otho, clad in an old grey flannel suit and sweater, swung along the Yelverbury Road, that leads from Tonbury across the Downs, at a five-mile-an-hour heel-and-toe training walk.

Daily he did his ten miles thus, and daily ran a couple of miles at a fair pace, in addition to his morning gymnasium work and nightly boxing.

For had he not decided to follow his bent, or rather to use his remarkable natural gifts, to provide himself with a livelihood and a career, to raise himself to fame and eminence, and to fulfil two ambitions?

Of these, the first was to give Joe Mummery cause to retract his statements that Otho was an unreliable coward, a fight-seller, and an ungrateful hound; the second was to become Heavy-Weight Champion of the World.

As he strode along, although bursting with health, strength and vigour, he was far from happy. He felt he had for ever lost his two best friends. . . . (His mother would "come round" all right.) . . . Dear old Joe. . . . Damned insulting old Joe. . . . He would take Joe's Championship of England from him, and then see what he had to say about fight-sellers, double-crossers, temperamental boxers, and those who were very tricky and clever in their boxing-quarters and utterly useless in the ring. Also he would send him the big cheque which he, Otho, would receive as the winner's share of the proceeds, and every penny he made on the contest, so that Joe would get that as well as the loser's end of the fight, and so have the whole lot—and then see what he had to say about ungrateful hounds.

And the World's Heavy-Weight Championship! The Championship back in England again—in the hands of Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême.

It would be rather amusing to assume his title then, and be known throughout the world as the Boxing Baronet. . . . Some worthy souls would say, "How shocking! How dis-

gusting! A man of ancient family, and—by birth, at least—a gentleman."

Others with a possibly truer perspective would say:

"Splendid! Why not? It might do some of our funny Labour Members and their followers no harm to see an effete, despised and hated 'aristocrat' in the rôle of World's Champion." . . . And why, pray, should not the Heavy-Weight Boxing Champion of the World be a gentleman? What incompatibility is there in being the greatest living exponent of the greatest, bravest sport, and in being a gentleman?

In what did the knighthood, of a knight of old, originally consist, but in its wearer's being a distinguished wielder of the sword and his being "gentle" in his dealings with men and women, especially the poor and oppressed. He was a warrior and a terror on the battlefield or in the lists, and he was also a "gentle"; a gentleman.

Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême would be a warrior, a terror in the ring, and he would be—what he was by long descent—a gentleman. . . . And then as he swung along, head in air, a fine look of resolution on his face, he almost ran into his other lost friend—Margaret.

Whatever might be Margaret's views as to the rightful emancipation and "modernity" of the modern girl, she was, in spite of the best of school-mistresses, perfectly natural in manner and conduct. It might give her satisfaction to demonstrate to her mother that times had indeed changed since Rosie was a girl, and to herself that she was utterly free from sentimentality, stuffiness and "slush"; but she was nevertheless competent to assess values with fair accuracy and to avoid going over-far in the opposite direction. A very good heart and a very good head maintained a very good balance, the latter checking the former upon frequent occasions—and here was one of them.

"'Tho, dear!" she cried, her face flushing warmly and her bright eyes sparkling, "I am so delighted to see you . . ." and she held out both her hands—a lifelong habit of hers, when encountering Otho, an expression of an ever-fresh delight.

Otho was frankly surprised. This was not the rather distant and self-possessed young lady who had appeared a little unfriendly at that beastly lunch at Oxford.

He took her hands in his, pressed them, and quickly dropped them, for it seemed, during one terribly beautiful second, that she was going to kiss him.

His heart thumped painfully, and then slowed down, as though sinking into a slough of despair.

Realising no rebuff, Margaret seized him by the lapels of his coat and almost shook him in her honest and unrestrained joy at seeing the dear play-mate of her childhood once again.

"You do look well—and—and—fine, 'Tho dear," she said. . . . "Just a little thin and oh, grown-up, you know. . . . Why don't you come to see us, 'Tho? It is too bad of you, and you have never once written to me. . . . I often wrote to you, 'Tho."

"What? You did? Well—I've never had a single one of them, Margaret. . . . Truly I haven't! If I had, I . . ."

"I know you haven't had them, dear. I burnt them when they were quite finished!" she smiled.

Otho stared.

"What were they about?" he asked.

"Oh—just things. . . . And you. . . . And me. . . . Just rubbish. . . . And old times, 'Tho, and the 'far, far distant wonderful days of our long-lost youth.'"

"Poor old lady," he laughed uncomfortably.

"Oh, and the last one, 'Tho, was a terrible one. . . . Such an awful one. . . . Such a scolding I gave you. . . . Oh, I was so upset. . . . It nearly made me ill. . . . And I couldn't say a word about it at home."

"What was it? . . . I don't . . ." interrupted Otho.

"Why—it was your deliberately and unintentionally losing your finals with Jack. . . . You know you did, 'Tho . . . and I think . . . I think it was a beastly thing to do. . . . It wasn't fair to Jack, and it wasn't fair to yourself. . . . I absolutely hated you that night. Why did you do it, 'Tho?"

"I didn't do it intentionally, Margaret," he said.

"You really mean to say that you were really doing your damndest, 'Tho? And that Jack really beat you, fair and square! . . . Fairly beat you on points—as he thinks he did?"

"I didn't lose the fight intentionally, Margaret," he repeated. "I meant to win it. . . . I wanted to win it. . . . I tried to win it."

"Well, I'm puzzled, 'Tho. I really am. So were a lot

of people. And nearly everybody says it was an absurd decision. . . . Why you were playing with Jack at times."

"He nearly knocked me out," Otho reminded her.

"Yes, when you looked away from him, when somebody laughed."

"More fool me," admitted Otho.

"Yes—and you're not a fool, you know, Otho. . . . So I'm puzzled. . . . And I'm not a fool either, 'Tho, am I?"

"No, Margaret, you're not. You're the best and sweetest and dearest girl that . . . Bless me! It's eleven o'clock. . . . I must be getting back. . . . Good-bye, Margaret."

"Have you a couple of trains to catch, 'Tho?" inquired the girl. "I thought perhaps you'd walk back a little way with me. . . . Possibly come to lunch."

"No, I really can't, thanks. . . . Thank you very much. . . . I must hurry back."

Margaret gazed intently and thoughtfully at the face of the hero of her childhood, the object of her flapper-stage hero-worship, the individual whose departure out of her life had left a literal and genuine "aching void," for quite a long time.

Her pellucid honesty, simple straightforwardness, unaffected candour and great friendship, impelled her to throw aside the usually thick cloak of her reserve.

"Good-bye, 'Tho dear,' she said, "and—listen. If you don't happen to be in such a hurry the next time we meet, and you can stop and chat for a while, I shall summon up courage to ask you to tell me 'all about it' . . . Your leaving Oxford like this . . . and giving everything up . . . and the boxing-booth. . . . I have been asking Jack all about you. . . . Not out of idle curiosity, 'Tho. . . . You are my oldest friend and I have always been so proud of you. . . . Buck up, 'Tho, you can do better than this, dear. . . . Do forgive me for being so impertinent, 'Tho."

Margaret's face glowed with a blush that mounted to her hair, and her eyes shone with the intensity of her feeling for this poor, proud, unhappy boy whom she had adored during her childhood; but in spite of her blush and her obvious discomfort, she kept her eyes bravely fixed upon his. . . . And saw his face go white and drawn and haggard. . . . Saw his eyes fall, unable to meet hers. . . . Saw him look hurt and ashamed.

"Keep a little faith in me, Margaret dear," he said, and strode off.

§ 2

This was being a rather terrible day, a day that had begun badly.

While Mrs. Pounder and Victoria were engaged in the making of beds, there was a knock at the front door, and Mrs. Pounder bade Victoria see who it was.

Victoria obeyed, opened the front door, beheld a tall stern policeman, and collapsed.

The policeman, who had called on some matter of formal business, concerning the continued licensing of the Pugilists' Paradise, assisted Mrs. Pounder in the business of giving First Aid to the Fainting—or Fainted; and with the help of cold water, cold air, smelling salts and burnt feathers, Victoria was restored to consciousness.

On opening her eyes and beholding a large, stern policeman bending over her, she apparently fainted again.

Having carried the girl upstairs, at Mrs. Pounder's request, and laid her on her bed, the constable departed, much puzzled, and, on his way to the police-station, called at the house of Dr. Melluish and left information that the doctor was wanted at 18, Duggett Street.

On coming to the house at mid-day, Otho was received by Mr. Pounder, who said mysteriously:

"Mrs. Pounder wants a word with you, Bob."

Otho accordingly waited on that lady, and received her shrewd comments on the events of the morning, ending with:

"Ye had better go an' hae a talk with the lassie the noo, an' ye can come an' tell me when ye're going to get married. I know what I know, an' many a fine horse has started the race before the flag fell, but I'll no encourage it in ma hoose."

Otho felt that the way of the chivalrous, like that of transgressors, is hard—and sometimes a good deal harder.

To keep his promise to Victoria it seemed he must have endless trouble and keep a mill-stone about his neck. He must either suffer her or abandon her—and that he would not do. What made things more difficult than they already were, was this perfectly idiotic suggestion that he should marry the girl! This class of person appeared to think that

it was impossible for a man to help a girl without "leading her to the altar" as the fools called it.

He, Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, marry Victoria Bate!

He might be down but he was not out—even if his life was henceforth to be passed amongst the Pounders, and Victorias, and Briggses of the world.

With a sense of irritation and a feeling of indignant frustration, he sought Victoria, who was lying on the hard sofa in the "parlour."

He tried once more to persuade her to tell him the initials of the man who had been the cause of all the trouble, but it was useless.

"Oh, give over, do," answered Victoria. "I can't stand any more of it, not for anybody. . . . An' I'm goin' to shove me head in the gas-oven to-night."

With this threat she began to cry again, and between her sobs Otho heard:

"You said you'd do somethink to help, an' you haven't done it. You brought me here, an' they all think you're going to marry me. . . . But you don't . . . you don't do anything. . . . You're like all the rest when it comes to a girl trusting you. . . . You say . . ."

"Look here, Victoria," Otho broke in wearily, "I do want to help you, and I have done, and am doing, my utmost. Can't you see that the best way out of it would be to tell me everything and help me to help you."

"Oh—talk some more!" snapped Victoria. "Don't talk about marrying me, or anything useful like that, though."

"I have not the faintest intention of talking of marrying you, Victoria," replied Otho coldly.

§ 3

It has to be recorded that the attitude of Lady Mandeville-Bellême toward Victoria Bate remained uncompromisingly hostile—indeed, most bitterly hostile. She loathed, scorned and feared Otho's connection with the girl, and made no secret of the fact. To her mind the whole affair was Low—Low in the extreme: and, to Otho's angry and miserable bewilderment, his mother was as sceptical as Pug Pounder himself, and indeed, everybody else.

The opinion of the others mattered little, but that his own mother and his beloved Joe were incapable of "understanding a gentleman," as he phrased it, was dreadful. But if this failure of those who, above all people, should have understood him almost broke his heart, it had precisely the opposite effect upon his pride and that resolute stubbornness which he mistook for firmness and strength of character, and which was the heritage of the Bellême, *I Saye and I Doe.*

It was not until later that Otho Bellême realised that, to a Mary Hawkins and a Joseph Mummery, any such connection between Castle and Cottage could mean but the one thing. In their love for him they regarded him as of the Castle, and felt nothing but a shocked disgust that he had obviously "taken up" with a girl of the Cottage.

In vain he remonstrated with his mother and told her the simple truth. She simply could not, and did not, believe it, and could only beg him, if he had a spark of love for her and gratitude for Joe Mummery, to stop disgracing them all at Tonbury, send the baggage about her business, and come back home and live it down.

"Can't you see what the hussy's working for, you silly boy—even if all you say was true? She's out to get her marriage lines of course, and to be Lady Mangle-Blame on top of it."

Otho sighed once more.

"Don't talk such rot, Mother," he begged. "You're as bad as the Pounders."

"Ah! They're in it too, are they? Just what I said! . . . There you are! . . . All a put-up job among the lot of them. . . . Oh, my boy, how can you go on like this. It's fair breaking me up and poor Joe Mummery too, it is. You going about with servant-girls when you ought to have been thinking about learning your books and getting on. . . . Just when you got a chance of being a gentleman and all . . . a common servant-girl—and whether it's living with her or marrying her, it's a disgrace and a shame. What you want to do it for, I don't know."

To Otho's surprise, the only member of his Tonbury circle of friends and relations who seemed to have the faintest doubt of his villainy or the vaguest glimmerings of under-

standing of his conduct, was his cousin, Miss Elizabeth Briggs.

From an angry contempt, Liz softened to something approaching sympathy—not with his professed intentions and ideals, but with his unfortunate and unpleasant situation.

Waylaying him in the shop, on the occasion of one of his visits to his mother, Liz offered her help and countenance.

"Tell you what, Bob," she said, almost shyly, taking him by the lapels of his coat, and making a tentative, but unrecognised, offer of a kiss, "I'll come and see that girl of yours, if you like. . . . Take her about a bit. . . . She'll get the hump something awful, without a soul to speak to, except old Mother Pounder. I'll take her to the pictures and the Palace, now and again. . . . Be friendly to her. . . . Shall I, Bob?"

Otho was touched.

"It's most awfully kind of you to think of it, Liz. . . . Really kind. . . . But I'd hate you to do anything to cause yourself unpleasantness at home. . . . Your mother would loathe it, and so would mine—and it would only make more family wrangling."

"Rats!" observed Miss Briggs. "I can see myself doing what they like! . . . Give 'em something to wrangle about, if they interfere with me. . . . I'll come round one night next week, when you've gone away with Pounder's show. . . ."

Otho again thanked Liz warmly, accepted a cousinly kiss and departed.

"Yes, my lad," mused Miss Briggs, pinching her lower lip and staring with narrowed eyes at the door through which Otho had disappeared. "I certainly will. . . . The pictures, I think—*and* . . . ? Young Bert? No, the little tyke . . . that wouldn't do any good. . . . Perce Barker? . . . No. Pretty nigh as soft as Bob. . . . Wal Pink? . . . No. Got his hands full. . . ."

Miss Briggs hung in thoughtful doubt. Suddenly her face cleared.

"I'm going barmy," she said. *"Ted Baldon!* . . . Coo!"

CHAPTER XV

"LUMMY, look at 'im! He don't arf think he ain't somebody, do'e?" observed Sailor Harris, with a jerk of his head in the direction of Mr. Alf Moggs, *alias* Signor Antonio Rudolfo the wild-beast-tamer, who, cracking a most vicious-looking whip, strolled past the boxers' camp-fire, on his way from his caravan to the big circus tent which adjoined Mr. Pounder's booth.

Mr. Moggs was, for some reason—possibly the impressing of his lionesses, if not his lions—arrayed in a uniform of which one or more of the component parts might have been recognised and identified by a Polish lancer, a Hungarian hussar, a Spanish dragoon, a Russian Imperial life-guard, and a British seaside bandsman.

"Reminds me of when I was in the army, 'e do," continued Sailor Harris reminiscently.

"Oh, have you been a soldier as well as a sailor?" inquired Otho.

"Ar! That's right," replied Sailor Harris, "and seen some messy scrappin' I did, too."

"Oh, what campaign? Which was your regiment?" asked Otho. "Fancy your having been a British warrior! Good old Harris."

"No campaign, no regiment, no British, no warrior," grinned Harris. "I never wasn't in no British Army. I was in the French Army I was, yer see—and serve me right for a silly boozer."

And he paused in his narrative to enrich the minds of his listeners—Sturge, Tod Maclehose, Walter Jones, The Sheffield Blacksmith, the Battersea Boy and Otho—with a verse or two of a song, the opening words of which propounded the conundrum:

"What shall we do with a drunken sailor?"

"Yus," he resumed, his brief flight into the realms of song concluded, "drunk as David's sow I was, yer see. . . . Wonder what that sow got drunk on? . . . Down at a place they

call Ma Sails, in the Mediterranean. Must 'ave 'ad a most 'appy night ashore, I must, for I wakes up in clink, yer see, just as a bloke comes in with a canful o' corfee. Silly sort o' cove 'e was. Couldn't 'ardly speak English. Fair ole pantermine it was.

"'*Juice,*' he says.

"'Ar! That's right,' I says, 'and where the juice am I?'

"'*In the army,*' 'e says, '*and in the box. You're a soldier,*' 'e says.

"'You're a liar,' I says, 'I'm a sailor.'

"'*Ar! That's right,*' 'e says, '*a sailor what's joined the Legion of Strangers,*' 'e says.

"An' seemin'ly 'e was right too. I'd bin so drunk the night before, yer see, I bin and joined the French Foreign Legion, instead o' going back to my ship, I had. God knows 'ow I did it—but they seemed to know all right. Anyways they'd got me, an' they kep' me, too."

"By Jove, that's interesting," said Otho. "Did you have a good time?"

"Well, not what I'd go for to call a good time," was the reply. "No, not 'arf, I wouldn't. But I see some rum goes. Not 'arf, I did."

"Fighting?" inquired Otho.

"Ar! that's right. Not 'arf, we didn't. Arabs. Good scrappers too; not 'arf. They can shoot straight and charge straight and take cover too; not 'arf they can't. Why, there'll be ten thousand of 'em there one minute, all 'oppin' about and wavin' swords and firin' rifles, and next minute there won't be a bloomin' one of 'em in sight—all gone down be'ind rocks and bushes and into the sand. Fair ole pantermine."

"Tell us some of your adventures," begged Otho, glancing round the muddy sordid fair-ground—cold, depressing, hideous—and thinking of a country of warmth and sunshine, sapphire sky and honey-yellow sands, a land of illimitable spaces, freedom, colour, adventure; a land where a fresh start in life might well be made by a youth who had made an utter hopeless mess of his life. . . .

"Adventures?" replied Sailor Harris. "I don't know as I had any adventures. Lots of scraps and all that, and I was captured once I was, and jolly nigh done in, too. Fair ole pantermine it was. We was all killed in a scrap, except me and my chum, an' they took us to an 'orrible native town

in the desert, and give us over to the king o' them parts. Nasty bloke. What they call a Kite in them parts, yer see."

"Kaid?" murmured Otho.

"I told 'im 'e was a dirty dog, I did, and so 'e was—an' calling 'im a dirty dog saved me bloomin' life it did."

"'Ow's that?" asked Sturge, mildly interested.

"Showed I could speak English," was the reply.

"A friend of the English, was he?" asked Otho.

"No fear! Not 'im. Not 'arf! 'Ated 'em like poison, and 'e 'ated the French like 'ell, and the Spaniards 'e 'ated like double-'ell."

"Then how did your speaking English save you?" urged Otho, as the inarticulate Sailor Harris, yawning hugely, tapped the bowl of his pipe on his boot-heel.

"Save me?" he replied. "Why they was goin' to chuck me over the wall on to some meat-'ooks, yer see, the very next day, they was; only, that night, this Kite's sister she comes down in the middle of the night to the bloomin' great cellar place where I was chained up like a dorg. A mos' lovely piece she was. Cor lummy! An' says she can get me out of it and took to a place called Tangier if I'll give a bloke there a message from her—not to be wrote down but spoke in English.

"Course I will! Then I looks for the ketch in it. There wasn't none as I could see. One of these Arab blokes of 'ers, as can't speak, yer see, he's goin' ter take me to this place called Tangier—nasty open sort of port it is; no proper 'arbour. Discharge into lighters you do—and take me to the 'ouse of a bloke as lives there. I has to give this bloke the message in English, and if I gives it allright 'e tells the bloke what brought me that it's all right, and he bungs off, leaving me in this bloke's 'ouse, yer see. 'E 'as ter give me two 'undred an' fifty francs for meself, too. Ten quid that is. And 'elp me on me road to wherever I wants to go. Fair ole pantermine."

"Who was he? Another Kaid, or some big man in Tangier, then?" asked Otho.

"No, 'e wasn't no Kaid nor nothing. A Seenyer 'e was—like ole Seenyer Alf Moggs Antonio Rudolfo, what goes in a cage and makes tame lions wild! . . . Yus, a Seenyer 'e was, Spanish or Italian or something. Seenyer Peter-oh Somethink-or-other 'is name was."

"And you gave him the message, and he gave you the money?" asked Otho, as Sailor Harris yawned again.

"Ar! That's right," acquiesced Harris. "What that woman said, went—and I hadn't neither scrap o' paper nor scrape o' pen to show him, neither. My golly, she was a lovely piece! And knew what she wanted too. Talk like a ring-master, she did. You know—'aughty and commandin' like."

"What language did she talk to you?" asked Otho.

"Bit o' French, little bit of Arabic, an' a lot of English. Spoke quite good English, she did; only pronounced it funny. Got an English name too. Elizabeth Ellen it was. . . . She called it Eleeserbeth Ellain. . . . Fair bit of all right she was. Ses I got to fight like 'ell if we was attacked. . . . *'English very brave,'* she ses. *'Ar! That's right,'* I ses. *'I'll fight orlright.'*

"Cor lummy! I didn't want to be copped again! . . . And I mustn't, on no account, give 'er message to anybody but the bloke at Tangier, nor say it in anythink but English. . . . Fair ole pantermine it was.

"Well, we gets away all right. This dumb bloke wasn't 'alf 'andy with his knife. He'd fair done-in the bloke as was sentry over the cellar-place where they'd chained me up, and another bloke down the end of the long passage, and another bloke by a door.

"When we passes the guard-house, 'e make some blooming deaf-and-dumb signs, and they lets us by orlright."

"Were you disguised then?" interrupted Otho.

"Me? Disguised? They gimme a thing like a blooming great 'orse blanket, with an 'ood to put over me 'ead. . . . Looked like a blooming native I did. . . . At last we gets outside, me and this dumb bloke, and off we goes on foot down into the town.

"Well, we can't go outer the town then, because the gates is shut. They shuts 'em all at sunset and don't open them until sunrise. Not for nobody. Not for Pomptious Pilate himself they wouldn't. But this dumb bloke don't 'alf know 'is way about, and at last we goes along a narrow lane and then up some steps on to the city wall and then climbs down where it's all broke and fallen to pieces. Then we goes round and strikes the track outside the gate, an' blimey if 'e don't go up to a woman sitting on an ole moke in the shadow

of some trees by a well! . . . She ses something to 'im and off we goes, the three of us, and marches all night—four of us really, for blowed if the old hag hasn't brought her little black picaninny with her. . . . What's more, she's got a rifle tied on the moke for me.

"Well, off we goes, and blow me if this dumb bloke an' 'is missis an' the kid on the moke don't look for all the world like a picture that uster be on the wall in our Sunday School! . . . I think it was the 'Oly Family fleeing from Pharaoh into Egyp'.

"But we don't have to 'oof it too long, because the dumb bloke's got money, and in the first place we comes to, 'e either buys or 'ires some mangy camels. . . . Drives a 'ard bargain too, an' without speakin' a word. Makes out I'm dumb too, an' when 'e opens his mouth and points into it you can see 'e ain't got no tongue. . . . Oh, an 'orrid sight.

"Well, we jogs along, day after day, mindin' our own business an' behavin' meek and humble in the villages and oases, an' nobody don't take no notice of us, and us looking too poor and ragged to be worth attacking.

"But what did make me fair wild was one day near the end of the journey, some dirty dogs out of some caves up a mountain-side starts shooting us up, an' goes and 'its the poor old gel.

"Proper nice ol' gel she was, an' although she's 'it bad, she doesn't think about nothink but 'er kid. Wants 'er ol' man to take it an' do a bunk and leave 'er there to die.

"'E does too!

"'*Oh, you dirty dog,*' I ses. '*Come back!*' But off he goes with the kid an' all the camels, and wants me to come too.

"'*Not me,*' I ses. '*Not till the ol' gel's dead . . . and then not till I shot some o' these dirty dogs first.*' . . .

"'It bad, she was, under the left arm, and coughin' blood.

"Well, I gets be'ind a rock and does some fancy shootin', swearing somethink 'orrible, an' the poor ol' gel lyin' beside me coughing blood an' trying to tell me to bung off after 'er old man an' the kid.

"Which I don't do till she's a stiff-un an' I got off about twenty-five rounds at them murdering dirty dogs up by the caves.

"Then I retires in good order, from rock to rock, and any

bloke that shows himself to follow, gets it in the neck. . . . Pretty good shot, I was, those days.

"But it give me the fair 'ump to leave the old gel lying there without a decent funeral nor Christian burial. . . . Not that the poor ole 'eathen was a Christian, I don't suppose.

"Well, then I finds this dumb bloke waiting for me. . . . Run for miles, 'e 'ad; 'e must have walloped them ol' camels along. Fair ol' pantermine, it was.

"Well, we gets to Tangier an' 'e takes me to this bloke's 'ouse and I gives 'im the message and 'e asks me some questions and then I gives him the message agin. Then 'e writes it down, and makes me say it all over agin and compares what I says with what 'e's wrote. *'An' you got to give me two 'undred an' fifty francs,'* I says, each time, *'and also to 'elp me to 'op it.'* An' 'e does too. Cor lummy! Fair ole pantermine it was."

"What was the message?" asked Otho, as Sailor Harris fell silent.

"All about saving some little jewels," was the reply. "I 'ad to say that three times, each end of the message."

"And what about the big jewels?" asked Otho.

"Nothink," cried Sailor Harris succinctly. "All about some *little* jewels, it was. Leastways, at both ends of the message."

"Have you forgotten the whole message?" prompted Otho, deeply interested.

"Blimey, no!" Sailor Harris asseverated with conviction. "I reckon I'll remember that until I fergits me bloomin' name. Me perishin' life depended on it, yer see. All them 'undreds o' miles across the mountains from the Kaid's town to Tangier I kep' repeatin' it.

" 'Save the little jewels! Save the little jewels! Save the little jewels! Gibraltar. England. Don't trust my brother any more. His wife has won. Give this man two hundred and fifty francs and send him over the sea. Peter-oh's gazelle Elizabeth Ellen speaks. Save the little jewels! Save the little jewels! Save the little jewels!' Yus, that was it."

"Why didn't you make it a thahsand francs, mate, while you was abaht it?" inquired The Battersea Boy.

"Because I wasn't playin' no funny tricks, thank you. 'Ow did I know where the ketch was? Besides, I give the

girl my word and she give me 'er word. Besides, she says *'You're English. English can be trusted,'* so I wasn't playin' no tricks, not in the dark like that, I wasn't. 'Ow did I know what the game was? Any'ow, the bloke gets 'er meanin' all right, and knows the message must be from 'er, so 'e tells the bloke that 'ad brought me, that it's all right, and he can 'op it. And the next day 'e 'elps me to 'op it."

"And where did you hop it to?" asked Otho. "For Heaven's sake, man, tell us the story properly."

"'Op it to? Back to Barracks. And that was 'undreds of miles away. I joined a ship sailin' from Tangier to a place called Algiers. Bloomin' good port it is too. Workin' me passage as a deck 'and."

"You went back to the Legion?" asked Otho.

"Yus. There was a bloke in my squad owed me four francs 'e did, and I'd promised my chum, pore ole Peer Legrand, I'd let 'is young brother Jeen know what become of 'im. 'Ung 'im on a meat-'ook, they did, like liver-and-lights in a butcher's shop.

"Poor ole Peer! We didn't uster 'arf laugh at each other, 'cos 'e spoke such silly English. Always called me *'Arry,* 'e did—and thought 'e was sayin' *'Arris,* the silly ole mug!"

"Nah then, you cripples, walk up," bawled the raucous voice of Mr. Pounder, and, for the moment, Otho heard no more of the Odyssey of Sailor Harris.

CHAPTER XVI

AND it came to pass that in the fullness of time, Mr. Pounder's Pugilists' Peripatetic Paradise approached the end of its annual tour, and, one Sabbath eve, it reached its penultimate stopping place at Yelverbury in time for the Fair, to spend its last week of circuit before returning to the neighbouring city of Tonbury, to hibernate as usual in its winter quarters.

To greet her lord, Mrs. Pounder fared forth by peaceful meandering Sabbath 'bus and, after chaste greetings, delivered herself of a speech neither peaceful nor meandering. Whereafter, Mr. Pounder rubbed his head at some length, and bade his better half walk warily, for Bob Blame was a difficult lad to handle, by reason of his strange ideas and the invincible stubbornness wherewith he pursued them to their illogical conclusion.

Also, Mrs. Pounder, like her lord, must be prepared to put up with pretty well blooming nigh anythink rather than risk the irreparable loss of their pearl of greatest price, the future Heavy-Weight Champion of the World.

"Bob, boy, I wants a word with you, and don't go and fly off the handle, or down me throat, before I've said what I've got to say," spake Mr. Pounder, as Otho entered the temporarily empty boxing-booth early on the Monday evening.

"Well?" replied Otho briefly, his body and temper alike a little fine-drawn after months of fighting, night after night, against all and sundry. A campaign in which he had, undefeated, encountered navvies, blacksmiths, sailors, soldiers, and local aspirants to amateur or professional eminence, with each and all of whom he had been instructed by Mr. Pounder, to deal as gently as circumstances and their merits might permit.

"It's about your girl, Bob, er—ahem—that girl, I mean, you brought from Oxford."

"Yes? Victoria Bate. Well?"

Otho's manner was not encouraging. He leant against a post of the ring, his hands in his pockets and his hard eyes probing those of Mr. Pounder. But Mr. Pounder had his orders from her who must be obeyed, and he intended to do as much of his painful duty as was compulsory.

"Well, it's like this, Bob, boy. The missus has been missing things."

"Appropriate pastime for a missus," commented Otho's imp.

"First of all, jes' little things—apples, cakes, odds and ends of grub . . . nothink to speak of, only a bit annoyin' if you're Scotch and 'ate pilferin'. . . . Then the old gel misses her best pair of silk stockings, and nothink can't persuade her as the cat's ate 'em. Then blowed if she don't find she's right, and the mice hadn't took 'em after all. For, lo and behold, she sees 'em walking along 'Igh Street in front of 'er—walking along with that double-crossing fly-blown disgrace to the Fancy—our old friend, Ted Baldon."

"What are you talking about?" interrupted Otho impatiently. "I've got to wind this bunting round these ropes."

"Talkin' about?" continued Mr. Pounder. "Stockings, ain't I? Walkin' along 'Igh Street with Ted Baldon and your gel, I mean, that gel, inside 'em. An' when the missus, 'earing her come into the 'ouse, goes up to the gel's room to speak her mind, the gel ups and calls her a liar and proves it too, for she'd got a pair o' black woollen ones on! . . . The old lady was that took aback you could have knocked her down with a crow-bar."

"And I should have felt like doing it, had I been Victoria," said Otho.

"Easy, boy, easy, and listen to what I've got to say. . . . Now the old gel 'as got a lot o' funny little habits, and one of them is to 'ang on to every half-crown that comes her way. Never spends one, not on no account. Puts each one she gets into an old tea-pot on top of the dresser until she's got eight. Then she turns 'em into a sovereign an' hides it away where I can't get at it. Banks it, for all I know. When I asks her how it's getting along, she says it will keep her goin' while I'm in prison, and nasty remarks like that. . . .

"Well, as I was saying, she's got seven 'alf-crowns in her tea-pot, an' one day she goes to put in the last one, an' lo and behold there's five! . . . Lord I wouldn't have dared 'a'

done it! . . . Talk about a lioness robbed of 'er yelps! . . .

"Well, what does the old gel do? She goes and delibritly changes a 'alf-sov into 'alf-crowns and puts three of 'em into the tea-pot, making eight—and, with a 'ammer and a nail, what does she do but whang a little dent in 'Is Majesty's ear-'ole, and, in case that ain't enough, she scratches a copyin'-ink pencil all round the rough edge of each one of 'em.

"Then she visits that tea-pot every night an', lo and be'old, after a week, Saturday night o' course, them eight 'alf-dollars 'as become five again,—five seeming to be 'er lucky number.

"Well, the missus ain't so dusty at 'rithmetic and Natcheral 'Istory and, in the light of them two useful sciences, she reckons firstly, that if there's two people in an 'ouse where something's stole, if one of them ain't a thief the other must be—Natcheral 'Istory rulin out the cat and the canary, not to mention casual rats, mice an' beetles."

Otho's thin hard face seemed to the uncomfortable Mr. Pounder to grow a little harder and thinner as the boy bade him be less humorous and more succinct.

"Well, it bein' Saturday night, and the gel gone out as usual with your Liz, the missus don't feel justified in suspecting the poor innocent young female, so up she goes, and opens her box . . ."

Otho's snort of disgust was drowned in the flowing tide of Mr. Pounder's oratory.

"An' what does she find? Firstly and foremostly her missing Sunday silk stockings without 'ardly a 'ole in 'eel or toe! . . . Yes, you can glare, my boy, but there they was, and underneath 'em, curious to relate, a couple of 'alf-crowns —of all coins—each bearin', strange to say, an enlarged ear-'ole in 'Is Majesty's 'ead,—not to mention marks of copyin'-ink pencil round the edge comin' off blue on the fingers when spat upon. . . ."

Mr. Pounder fumbled in his waistcoat pocket.

"And 'ere they are, Bob, boy, for you to see, with your own eyes—an' I know you're too just and honnerable to call my missus an ol' liar, which she ain't, teetotaller or no.

"And if that ain't enough, there was quite a young orchard of apples, an' such odds and ends as a pen-knife of mine; a bead necklace I bought the missus in Maidstone and she asked me what the 'ell I took 'er for and never wore; a little gold buckle with a brown shiny Scotch stone in it she must

have got by rummaging in the old gel's chest o' drawers; an' other odds and ends,—an' it won't do, Bob."

Frowning heavily, Otho tapped his teeth with his thumb-nail and stared at the trodden grass beneath his feet.

"There's other things too, Bob. . . . She stinks o' scent an' sometimes o' whisky, and she's got things—not belongin' to us, I don't mean—that she couldn't of come by honest. . . . An' she comes 'ome that Saturday night, gigglin'-silly. . . . An' when the missus goes to let her in, there's that low blaggard Ted Baldon 'avin' the sauce to be kissin' 'er at our front gate.

"No, she's in with a bad lot, Bob, an' if you don't mind my saying it, she's a bad lot herself. . . .

"Oh, an' there's this, too, Bob," continued Mr. Pounder, fumbling in the breast-pocket of his coat. "The missus thought you might reckernise it, and brought it over. . . . She never came by that honest," and Mr. Pounder produced a pocket-case of russia leather, obviously a man's, a kind of combined bank-note wallet, sovereign-case and pocket-book.

At this article, Otho stared in some amazement, for he had certainly seen it before.

Where, he could not say, but he felt absolutely certain that it had been in the hands of its proprietor, and not in a shop-window or on a shop-counter.

In frowning puzzlement, he turned it over and saw, stamped in gold letters, the initials, J.M.

Mr. Pounder, heaving a mighty sigh of relief, turned and departed from the great tent, his duty done.

J.M.? J.M.?

Now how on earth could the girl ever have had the chance to steal Jack Maykings's note-case?

Jack Maykings!

Steal it? She couldn't have stolen it. She could never have had the slightest opportunity. . . .

Unless . . . Unless . . . she had been in the habit of going to his lodgings!

Good God! . . . *J.M.* . . . The initials of "the man." She "only knew his initials." *J.M.* . . . *Jack Maykings!*

For a second he stood motionless, an ugly sneer marring his face, and then burst into laughter—a laughter unpleasant to hear, wholly unlike his usual hearty laugh.

Well! Well! Well!

No wonder he'd recognised the wallet as one he had seen before! Of course he had. . . . At Oxford. . . .

And how much money might there have been in it when it was given to the girl—or had it been empty? Yes, probably empty. . . . Just a little personal souvenir—of some pleasant little personal hours.

Lord! How little one really knew of people whom one thought one really knew.

Fancy Jack Maykings doing things like that.

Margaret's brother! Incredible. . . . And disgusting. . . .

But one must be just! Had he known of the sequel to those pleasant hours, and of Victoria's suicidal agony of tertor? . . . That should be discovered, all in good time.

And why had Victoria screened him? Did she so love him, then and now, that she would kill herself rather than appeal to his family for help? . . . Refrain from any sort of action which would bring him to shame and public disgrace —or to the degradation of marrying her?

Another unpleasant laugh.

Was Fate relentlesly bent upon making him play the part of idiotic and impossible hero of a sort of Adelphi drama?

Noble heroine—Margaret. . . . Base villain—Jack Maykings, her brother. . . . Innocent village maiden, betrayed by villain—Victoria. . . . Bluff British Squire, doting upon lovely heroine, his daughter, and upon the villain, his son,—Dr. Maykings.

Noble hero shields maiden betrayed by villain, to save the happiness of The Old Home occupied by Squire, son, and daughter—apparently; but really because of hero's grand unquenchable passion for heroine, whom he would save from the pain and grief of knowing her brother to be a villain!

Another bitter laugh.

Anyhow, Fate hadn't quite brought it off, inasmuch as hero had shielded betrayed maiden in utter ignorance of the fact that her betrayer was the brother of lovely heroine!

And now what?

Exposure? And what of Margaret and Dr. Maykings, so proud of their beloved Jack, so devoted to him. What of poor Mrs. Maykings, a typical fond mother. It would be an awful shock.

No. Certainly no exposure—for their sake. No exposure, but something private, personal and particular, for Jack Maykings, Esquire. . . .

Yes, confine the issue to the precious J.M., and not involve his devoted and admiring family. Why should they bear the burden of Victoria Bate?

On the other hand, why should Otho Bellême, if it came to that?

Why? Because he had begun by giving his word, and he would keep it—and not rid himself of this Load of Trouble if the Maykings family had to shoulder it.

The Maykings family—or Margaret?

Suppose there had been no Margaret, would he have played the altruistic fool for the benefit of Doctor and Mrs. Maykings? A thin smile softened the set of his mouth. He had saved Victoria Bate from suicide and had promised to stand by her in her trouble—but only until he could find "the man."

Well, now he'd found him, and it was up to "the man."

So look out, Mr. Jack Maykings.

With a grim nod and a heavy sigh, Otho slipped the wallet into the breast-pocket of his old mackintosh and stood staring unseeingly in front of him.

Was *"I Saye and I Doe"* such an excellent motto after all? Now for the first time in his life, Otho realised that all depended upon what the *Saye* was. . . . If you said you'd do something foolish, and inexorably went and did it, it wasn't quite so sound after all.

But he hadn't said something merely foolish when he had said he would save Victoria from suicide—had promised her that, if she trusted in him, he would not only get her out of her scrape, but save her utterly. He had said something humane and decent and honourable and manly, and he had scrupulously and meticulously kept the spirit and the letter of his word.

But—look out for yourself, Mr. Jack Maykings, and humbly thank the Lord your God, that Margaret Maykings is your sister!

Sweet, dear, delightful, wonderful, beautiful Margaret—the dearest pal man ever had.

Frowning heavily, Otho made his way over the muddy

Fair-ground to the property caravan that he shared with the devoted Sailor Harris, partook of the tea prepared for them by that faithful man, and then, having changed into the livery of battle, returned to the huge marquee, and the Peripatetic Paradise regained.

CHAPTER XVII

IN the Fair-ground of this little ancient town of Yelverbury, Otho Mandeville-Bellême, arrayed in his aged mackintosh, a cracked bowler hat and a suit of "fleshings" that had been pink, stood with three other men on the raised platform before the booth in which he boxed for a living.

Mr. Pug Pounder walked up and down, exhorting the crowd to Walk Up. He promised them the kind of artistic treat that would appeal to such cogniscenti as themselves; he promised them blood in buckets and blows in breadbaskets; he promised them the joy of witnessing a wonderful nine-round contest between experienced Age and impetuous Youth; also the sight of a wonderful fight between two of the greatest boxers of the day (there, for mysterious reasons, incognito, to find out who was really the better man —they being tired of the advertised flummery of great public matches at the Albert Hall, Olympia, and the National Sporting Club, where they had to do as their managers told them, and to fall down and take the count in the prescribed round).

He promised them the rare treat of seeing the Future Heavy-Weight Champion of the World—whom Mr. Pug Pounder was actually training at that moment and in that very booth—box with his sparring-partner and knock him about to his heart's content. . . . Whose heart was not indicated.

Furthermore and finally, he invited any gentleman there present, to pick his man from the Pink 'Uns on the platform, and come up and fight him for anythink from five to a nundred pahnds a side, and if no one cared to do that, any sportsman could step into the ring and have anythink from one to three rounds with any of the distinguished pugilists, free, gratis and for nothing—the sportsman being allowed to 'it as 'ard as 'e could, and the pugilist undertaking not to 'urt 'im.

The crowd gaped, gazing dully and open-mouthed at the

very terrible face of Mr. Pounder; at the "battered lineaments" of the three broken-down bruisers who let out their faces on hire to Mr. Pounder, for punching by such as could and would punch them, and at the handsome countenance of the stalwart youth who looked so different from his colleagues.

A thin trickle of men and lads dribbled into the tent. . . . A group entered *en masse,* escorting one who announced his intentions of challenging the smallest of the professionals.

The smallest of the professionals (nine stone), glanced at the sportsman—who appeared to weigh about fifteen stone and to have been nurtured on beef-steak from his youth up—and his thin lips smiled wryly. . . . A pity he was under contract not to hurt the sportsman.

Mr. Pounder loudly applauding the fine spirit and sporting nature of the sportsman, bade all present Walk Up and see the fight—which he ventured to say would be as pretty and bloody an exhibition of skill as England or America could produce. . . . Many, being wisely unwilling to miss the chance of witnessing so stirring a sight, Walked Up.

To be even a vicarious sportsman is cheap at sixpence for a seat on a carpet-covered bench, or threepence for one on a similar bench to which no carpet attaches.

"Walk Up! Walk Up!" bawled Mr. Pounder, "and see the Sheffield Blacksmith fight. . . . 'Im on my right 'and," and, standing to the left of Walter Jones of Hoxton, Mr. Pounder pointed with his thumb over his shoulder, into the face of the Sheffield Blacksmith, who had never been to Sheffield, nor, to his knowledge, ever seen a blacksmith.

The dirty nail of the thumb almost touched the dirty face of the Blacksmith, but failed to galvanise it into any semblance of life. It was there to be punched, not galvanised, and to earn its owner his nightly doss and his daily bread-and-cheese and beer, especially beer.

It was such a face, thought Otho, as the arenas of old knew (in the days when our ancestors, more fortunate than ourselves, could see people, whom they disliked, thrown to the lions), when the proletariat, at ease, with dignity, watched hired gladiators contending with weapons of iron and bronze on bloody sand, instead of, as now, watching hired gladiators contending for footballs of leather on muddy grass.

And, doubtless, the face of Walter Jones suggested that of a gladiator, for the simple reason that Walter Jones was

a gladiator—daily butchered, more or less, to make a British holiday.

"On my left 'and, you be'old the famous poogilist known the world over as the Battersea Boy—'oo as you all know, fought the Coloured Champion to a stand-still and would at this moment be the Middle-Weight Champion of the World but for what I do not for a moment 'esitate to dignify and denounce and derogodate as a Wrong Decision and don't care 'oo 'ears me say so."

The Battersea Boy, a lad of some fifty winters, grinned sheepishly, and gave a sideways nod to the crowd.

"'Im and the Sheffield Blacksmith will shortly give a Exhibition Bout, and will show you what Boxin' really is, or was, in the days when I was 'Eavy-Weight Champion myself," continued Mr. Pounder, "unless, that is to say, any local sportsman would like to show 'is friends and supporters that 'e is 'imself a true British Sportsman by 'aving a rahnd or two with either of these famous poogilists. You can 'it as 'ard as yoo like, ladies and gentlemen, and all taken in good part. No knock-ahts nor 'ard 'ittin' by the professional boxers be'ind me."

More Sportsmen Walked Up.

The crowd thickened and closed in.

"My turn next," said Otho to himself. "Shades of my noble ancestors who, in this very place, kept fighting-men, bull and bear-baiting dogs, champions and fools of their own! . . . Ironic justice that their descendant should be a hireling fighting-man and booth-scrapper himself. Very right and proper."

Suddenly a hoarse and raucous voice shouted from the back of the throng; the voice of Sailor Harris, Otho noted.

"'Ere, guvnor! I'll fight any one o' the lot for an 'undred pahnds a side. . . . If you got the money, that is."

"Money!" bawled Mr. Pounder in return. "Money! Yus —an' ten times as much. . . . Look 'ere . . ." and from his pocket he produced a bursting wallet. From this he extracted a roll of apparent bank-notes, counted twenty and detached them—scarcely reducing the bulk of the "wad" thereby—and flourished them aloft.

"There's your 'undred, Mister, an' welcome," he bawled. "Let's see the colour of yours—and then I'll shake you by the 'and as a True British Sport, an' we'll get dahn to business.

. . . Any one o' the famous poogilists be'ind me will accept your challenge."

The famous pugilists unanimously and simultaneously gave a nod of assent, even as well-trained theatre-supers and stage-crowds may be seen to do.

Sailor Harris, earning his nightly extra half-crown from Mr. Pounder, pushed his way through the mob, climbed to the platform, produced twenty notes, or "near" notes, and handed them to Mr. Pounder.

"Come on in and see fair, mates," he shouted to the crowd. "You all see me give 'im the stakes to 'old."

Many Walked Up, and excitement and enthusiasm awoke and waxed great. The crowd hummed with excitement.

Many more Sportsmen Walked Up.

A small crowd of biggish, loudly-dressed men, laughing contemptuously, and making unkind remarks, paid their way into the booth after jeering at the famous pugilists, the hundred-pound challenger, and even at the great Pug Pounder himself.

That gentleman treated them with the quiet disdain that their manner merited, and saw to it that each of them paid his sixpence.

A small group of gentlemen, whose overcoats covered evening-dress, also walked up. . . . Otho flushed slightly, and pulled his hat further down over his face. . . . Dr. Maykings, Jack Maykings, Maligni the Magnificent, Henry Hoalne—of all people, and Viscount Shannondale. Also a couple of young men unknown to Otho.

Had they come out of vulgar curiosity to see their former Oxford contemporary in his rôle of professional pugilist of the lowest type—booth-scrapping tough, public punching-block for yokels and townee "sportsmen"? . . . No. They knew nothing about it.

Mr. Pounder called his staff within, the big tent being full to overflowing, and bade them "fight like tripe-'ounds over a pahnd o' steak"—when boxin' each other—but not to go 'ittin' the public 'ard if any of it fancied a dob on the nose. . . . If any really useful tough got into the ring and give hisself airs, he was to be crimsonly eviscerated.

The usual terrific fight between the Sheffield Blacksmith and the Battersea Boy was followed by Mr. Maclehose's invitation to anyone present to come into the ring and have a

round or two. . . . A painful silence followed, as the assembly gazed upon the sinister face of the mighty Tod Maclehose and listened to the sinister quiet voice that invited them to try conclusions with him.

To none there was it arguable that the "conclusions" would need any trying.

"Did he say 'Try conclusions or concussions'?" smiled Dr. Maykings. "Quite a stout fellow for a strolling booth-boxer. . . . Now there was a time when it would have given me very great pleasure to have stepped into that ring and to have discovered for myself what he was worth. . . . I've half a mind, now, to . . ."

"No, you don't, Dad," interrupted Jack Maykings. "You just sit tight. . . . What would Mother say to us if we brought you home with a black eye?"

"I'm not so sure that you would, my boy," smiled the doctor.

"No, p'raps not, Sir," observed Maligni, "but don't forget that this fellow is in perfect fighting condition and that you are not. . . . And although he is probably not as good a boxer as you, he is a lot younger, of course."

Dr. Maykings allowed himself to be dissuaded, and Tod Maclehose was spared for the moment.

Various yokels and sturdy young townees responded to the invitations of Messrs. Jones, Sturge, and Harris, and were given a run for their money, generally a run round the ring, hotly pursued by a restrained and merciful pugilist.

Then followed the fight of the evening, that of Sailor Harris, the Challenger who had offered to fight any one of Mr. Pounder' staff, or string, of Champions.

Tod Maclehose had been chosen by the obviously rash "Challenger."

The fight was taken to ten rounds that the house might have its money's worth; and, in the tenth round, the Challenger was apparently knocked out by Tod Maclehose, mid scenes of the very wildest excitement, terrific cheering, much cursing and the exchange of many, if small, sums of money.

§ 2

As the excitement of the sportsmen, thrilled to their bones by the noble efforts of the Challenger, began to subside, Mr.

Pounder stepped into the ring and made a brief but impassioned speech.

"Lydies and gen'lemen," he said, "as one to whom the British Public of this great country looks, always 'as looked and, I 'ope, always will look for the truth, the 'ole truth and nothink but the truth, it is my most pleasin' dooty to inform you 'ere an' now, that, little as you might believe it to be so, I 'ave yet a greater treat in store for you. I 'ave 'ere in this very tent or marquee or Peripatetic Poogilists' Paradise the undoubted hauthentic an' genuine . . ."—and here Mr. Pounder lowered his voice to a thrilling stage whisper—"future 'Eavy-Weight Champion of England, of Europe and of the 'Ole World. Think o' that, lydies and gen'lemen! . . . An' for the small sum of six pence which you 'ave already paid you are going to be'old 'im in addition to what you 'ave already be'olded. An' moreover, lydies an' gen'lemen, anyone 'ere present before me now, can 'ave the boastful privilege of bein' able to say 'e 'as 'ad three rounds with the 'Eavy-Weight Champion o' the World, in days to come. One, two or three rounds, lydies an' gen'lemen, an' anyone wishin' to accep' this offer can spar gentle, box light, or fight 'eavy, accordin' to 'is taste. . . . Walk up, gen'lemen, an' 'ave anythink you like from one round to a bellyful. . . . You will now be'old 'im," and at this cue, Otho, repressing mingled emotions of shame, rage, amusement and exhilaration, threw his bowler hat into a wagon that stood by the private entrance to the tent, and made his way through the crowd to where the rows of sixpenny seats surrounded the ring.

When he emerged from the narrow passage between the seats, and came to the corner of the ring itself, he stood, as he removed his mackintosh, right in front of the Maykings party. A dull flush overspread his face and neck, as Doctor Maykings and his former fellow-undergraduates stared in amazement.

"Good God!" said Dr. Maykings.

"Otho!" murmured Jack.

"Good old Otho Bellême!" said Maligni the Magnificent.

Viscount Shannondale was the first to recover from the shock. He rose to his feet and, with a courtly bow, extended his hand.

"Mr. Bellême of St. Simeon's, I believe," said he. "I had

the pleasure of seeing you give a wonderfully pretty boxing-exhibition at Oxford. So you are going for the World's Championship, are you? How extraordinarily sporting! By Jove, I wish I had your pluck and strength and skill."

"Exceedingly kind of you, Shannondale," murmured Otho. "I'm a professional bruiser now, you know."

"Well, d'you know, I'd change with you to-morrow, Bellême, if I could," was the reply of the man who was not only an aristocrat but a gentleman, and not only a gentleman but a man.

"May I have the honour," he added, "of holding your mackintosh while you fight."

"Oh, I just chuck it under the ring, thanks," replied Otho, flushing again. "I fear it's hardly in a condition to be held by anybody whose clothes are clean. . . ."

By this time, the others were standing and gathering round the young pugilist.

"Splendid, my boy, I honour you," said Dr. Maykings, wringing Otho's hand warmly.

"I say, this is magnificent, Otho," said Jack, as he held out his hand.

Otho ignored both the remark and the hand.

"Congratters, Bellême, you're a sport. A downright damn good sportsman," said Malingi, and he too shook Otho's hand with much *empressement.*

Otho climbed into the ring, scarcely realising, in his annoyance and confusion, that Shannondale had had his way, and was holding the mackintosh much in the manner and the spirit in which a small boy holds the coat of his friend what time the latter wallops the common enemy.

"Now what the devil did that mean?" said Jack Maykings to himself as he resumed his seat. "The cut direct!" and there was a puzzled and angry look upon his face as he stared at Otho, while Mr. Pounder announced that for the next five minutes the invitation was open to any gent who wished to win now, and wear for ever, the noble name of Sportsman, to walk up and 'ave anythink from a two-minute spar to a gory battle with the Champion they saw before them.

Jack Maykings rose from his seat.

"I think I could do with a bit of exercise, Dad," he said to Dr. Maykings.

"Well, my boy, if you feel like giving the public a treat . . ." answered Dr. Maykings, and added, "You've beaten him twice. Third time's lucky. . . . Be rather amusing to be able to say that you once scrapped with him in a public booth, if he should become Heavy-Weight Champion."

Jack rose, and taking off his hat and coat, announced that it would give him great pleasure to have a round or two with Mr. Pounder's Champion.

Loud cheers filled the tent.

Jack Maykings climbed up into the ring and was informed by Mr. Pounder that he could, if he liked, come to the dressing-tent and be lent a clean vest and shorts as absoberlutely hadn't been wore by nobody since they was wore last.

"Come over here a moment before you decide, Maykings," said Otho quietly, and the two went to the other side of the ring.

"All a bloomin' fake!" roared one of the small party of sportsmen who had entered in a too hilarious, uproarious and contemptuous spirit, and whose attitude had been slightly offensive from the first.

"Fixin' up 'oo's to knock out 'oo. . . . And in which rahnd," he added.

Subconsciously, Otho heard this, as he stared balefully and menacingly at his former friend.

"Listen, Maykings," he said. "I advise you to get out of this ring a good deal quicker than you got into it."

"But, good Heavens, why? . . ." began Maykings.

"Why?" answered Otho. "Because if you don't, I'll do one of two things. I'll either knock you insensible through those ropes, in the first two seconds of the round; or else I will refrain from knocking you out at all, but will batter you sick, as well as making you the laughing-stock of the whole band of beasts who are here in the hope of seeing that sort of thing. Clear out while you can."

"But what's up, Otho? What the idea? I don't get you," declared the apparently astounded Maykings.

"Oh you don't, don't you?" growled Otho. . . . "Did you get poor little Victoria Bate, at Oxford? . . . Eh—did you, you young beast? . . . You don't get me, don't you? Well, you're going to get me, now, all right, unless you're out of this ring in a very small fraction of a minute," and Otho strode to a chair in the corner, on which lay a pair of gloves.

The spirit of his fathers, or perhaps of his father, stirred and swelled in the breast of Jack Maykings, and, crossing to the opposite corner, he dropped to the ground and resumed his seat.

"Bout's off," he grunted. "Dunno what's come over Otho."

The crowd in the vast marquee stared in silent astonishment.

Otho turned and looked in the direction of the noisy "sportsmen."

"I think," said he, in a quiet voice that was audible to every member of the large assembly, "that I heard some gentleman make a remark about 'fakes' and 'fixing things up.' . . . I wonder if he would like to come and have a round or two in which nothing will be faked or 'fixed up'—unless it's himself."

Every one turned and gaped at the "sportsman" at whom Otho was staring.

Viscount Shannondale stood up and turned to look, hoping to see someone rise and accept the challenge.

As he did so, something fell from the breast-pocket of the mackintosh which he held across his arm. It struck the foot of Maligni the Magnificent, and as Shannondale re-seated himself, both stooped to pick it up.

It was a combined wallet, sovereign-case and pocket-book, upon the front of which were stamped the initials, J.M.

Maligni secured it, and, as he was in the act of returning it to Shannondale, his eye fell upon the gilt letters.

Viscount Shannondale, extending his hand for the wallet that he might replace it in the mackintosh, found that Maligni seemed disposed to examine it. . . . He was obviously interested.

"What's up, Maligni?" he drawled.

Maligni began to open the thing. *"Good Lord!"* he said softly.

"Here I say," expostulated Shannondale, "that letter-case, or whatever it is, fell out of this coat—you can't open it. . . . It belongs to Bellême."

"Oh, does it?" replied Maligni. "Do these initials stand for Otho Bellême or any other kind of Bellême?"

"'J.M.,'" mused Shannondale. "By Jove! Jack Maykings."

"Yes," agreed Maligni. "Exactly, and quite so. . . . And likewise Josephus Mummery! . . . or perhaps . . ."

"Of course! . . . It belongs to Joe Mummery—or did belong to him at one time. . . . Shove it back."

"Joe Mummery . . . or Sir John Moore . . . or Jehoshaphat Melchisideck . . . or Jim Muggs . . ." continued Maligni.

Jack Maykings, who had been talking with his father, turned to see what interested them.

"Is this yours, J.M.?" asked Shannondale.

Jack looked at the pocket-book, long and hard, as though it evoked memories . . . elusive.

"No," he said at length. "The initials are mine but the book isn't. Give me back my initials and keep the book. . . . Where did you get it?"

"It fell out of this mack," replied Shannondale, and replaced the wallet in a pocket of the garment.

§ 3

Meanwhile, the largest of the sportive sportsmen had risen from his seat and made his way round the back of the tent—to reappear at the gangway that led through the seats to the ring.

Having struggled through the obstructing occupants of the narrow passage, he appeared at the ring-side and climbed into the ring.

He was tall, broad and bull-necked. He looked like a professional bruiser, of, rather, like a man who had been a professional bruiser, for he did not appear to be in good condition. There was too much colour in his cheeks, too much flesh on his jowls, too much colour in the whites of his eyes.

"Gennlemen all," he bawled raucously, "ole Pug Pounder says he's got the future 'Eavy-Weight Champion o' the World here," and he laughed jeeringly. "Anybody can 'ave anythink from one to three rahnds with this 'Eavy-Weight Champion o' the World—anythink from one rahnd to a bellyful. . . . Right-o, I'll 'ave ten seconds with him. . . . And Pug Pounder says anybody can spar gentle, box light, or fight 'eavy. . . . Right! Let 'is blooming-well 'Eavy-Weight Champion o' the World fight 'eavy then, with me, for ten

seconds! . . . 'Eavy-Weight Champion o' the World,' says Pug Pounder—the biggest liar and rottenest 'umbug in England, an' never fought anythink better than an 'ungry guttersnipe for a crust o' bread. . . . Says 'e's got the Champion 'ere, now, offerin' ter box anyone. . . . Well, Pug Pounder's told you what the man is. Now I'll tell you what he ain't—'e ain't 'Eavy-Weight Champion o' this bloomin' tent—to begin with. . . . See?"

Roars of laughter from the baser sort greeted this sally.

Mr. Pounder, his face pale and his look anxious, tapped the leg of Otho who stood smiling at the orator.

"It's Ted Baldon," he whispered hoarsely, as Otho leant over to him. . . . "He's been Champion of England. . . . You better clear out o' the ring. . . . I'll let 'im knock Tod Maclehose about, and I'll plurry well stop the bout in the ten seconds he's asked for."

"Rot!" said Otho.

"I don' want you damaged, boy," continued Mr. Pounder, "an' I don' want you to lose a fight in ten seconds. Nor in ten rounds yet. . . . I'll get a match for you against this swine when you're a bit more experienced. . . . I . . ."

Mr. Edward Baldon had finished addressing the multitude and turned to Otho. . . .

"So you're goin' ter be the 'Eavy-Weight Champion o' the World, are you, you pimpin' three-'aporth o' God-'elp-me! . . . When? Termorrer?"

"No," replied Otho. "About a couple of years, I should think. . . . Possibly less."

Mr. Baldon was shaken with helpless laughter. The crowd was thrilled to the marrow of its bones, for the local cognoscenti were well aware that Ted Baldon was not there to assist Pug Pounder in any "fake" for deluding the public. They knew of the bitter hatred existing between the two men since the time Ted Baldon double-crossed his trainer, backer and manager—Pug Pounder. And the words of the knowing ones travelled through the assembly.

When his laughter ceased, Mr. Baldon again turned to the crowd.

"Time it yerselves, gents," he bawled. "See if the ruddy Champion is on his feet ten seconds after the word *'Time.'* . . . And see whether he gets back on his pore feet in ten minutes . . ." and he commenced to undress, then and there,

coram publico. Removing coat, waistcoat, and muffler, he stood forth in a gymnasium singlet and tightly belted trousers. He was wearing rubber gymnasium shoes.

"The blighter had come prepared to prick the Pounder bubble, evidently," observed Dr. Maykings. "How I should like a round with the cocky beast."

"Poor Bellême!" said Shannondale. "He *is* a sportsman. . . . I'd give anything to see him last the ten seconds."

Otho crossed to where Baldon sprawled on a chair in his corner, his arms along the ropes, his legs stretched straight and limp before him.

"Wouldn't you like shorts, or a suit of fleshings?" he asked. "There's plenty of kit."

"Oh, go to 'ell!" growled Baldon. "Who are you sucking up to? . . . I ain't Vicky Bate! . . . Yus . . . I know all about yer! . . . Champion o' the World! . . . Champion girl-bilker! . . . Who got Vicky Bate into trouble, and then set her up in an attic, without a blinkin' penny? . . . Eh? . . . Yus . . . *I* know all about yer! . . . I'll give you an extra one for 'er, me lad, an' you'll never know what 'it yer."

Otho returned to his corner.

"Cover yerself up, boy, for God's sake, and I'll call *'Time'* after eight seconds, an' then the 'ole lot of us'll jump into the ring and go for the swine—if 'e don' come off it at the call."

"If you do anything of the sort, my dear Mr. Pounder, I'll leave your show to-morrow," replied Otho. "The round will go three minutes unless I am knocked out. And neither you nor anybody else will get into the ring while I am in it."

Mr. Pounder threw up his hands—and his case. Let Otho's blood then be on his own encarnadined head.

He climbed into his high seat and watched while Sturge and Maclehose assisted Mr. Baldon to get his gloves on.

Sailor Harris whispered to Otho, "Keep on dodgin' and duckin' an' runnin' away. I'm goin' to 'oller aht *'Ten seconds is up,'* whether Pug do or not."

"I'll give you the damnest hiding of your life, if you do," promised Otho.

"An' welcome," replied Harris, adding, "You're a novice, man, altho' you're a wonder—an' that over there is a *Champion.* . . . I tell you he . . ."

Mr. Pounder rose majestically and shouted:

"Seconds aht o' the ring! . . . As this is only a ten-second round by request o' the man 'oo 'as accepted the challenge—there will be no shakin' 'ands."

Mr. Pounder had seen nasty things happen over a misunderstanding on this point.

"Are you ready?"

"Time!"

The combatants arose, and their chairs were lifted out of the ring by their respective seconds.

Many men have been privileged to see a tiger spring on its prey—some themselves the intended prey. A few low-crouching steps, a stiffening quiver of the tail, a collecting and gathering-in of the whole body as every single muscle contracts, and then the launching of the terrible thing through the air, itself projector and projectile.

When Otho's fist struck Baldon's jaw, I do not think that any part of Otho was touching anything—save his fist the said jaw.

On the very sound of the word *"Time!"* he rose, he ran, he sprang as the tiger springs, himself the projectile that he hurled, some two hundred pounds in weight. And every pound of it was behind the uttermost strength and skill of a blow struck by a man whose strength was prodigious, skill uncanny, and timing phenomenal.

Baldon took that blow, which was terrible even to behold, full on the chin, and it was as though a sportive giant had bowled a cricket-stump with a cannon-ball.

The former Champion's body struck the ropes, the upper one caught the back of his neck, the lower one, his knees, and he went through them like a sack through the door of a truck, and fell in a senseless heap on the ground below.

Utter silence.

"Out *in one second,"* roared Harris, and a pandemonium of cheering arose. . . . The fickle throng acclaimed Otho with howls and yells.

Messrs. Pounder, Harris, Maclehose and Sturge, hauled the still inanimate body from the ground and lifted it into the ring.

Harris dashed water on the man's face and chest.

No sign of life.

No sign of life.

Still no sign of life.

Dr. Maykings climbed up and announced that he was a doctor and had better have a look at the fellow.

It was a proud moment; a great moment. For it was one of the few occasions upon which the famous boxing-expert, Dr. Maykings, had stood in a boxing-ring.

CHAPTER XVIII

DR. MAYKINGS was admittedly a good talker, and most certainly he had something to talk about, as he and his house-party strolled homeward after the resuscitation of Mr. Edward Baldon.

"Heavens Almighty!" he observed to his son. "I've been boxing and following boxing from the time I was big enough to hold up a pair of gloves, and I tell you, Jack, that was the mightiest blow I have ever seen delivered by the human fist."

"More like the kick of an inhuman mule," observed Maligni the Magnificent.

Arrived at Dr. Maykings' large and hospitable abode, the refreshment of the wanderers was superintended by Margaret, who, as they consumed chicken-sandwiches and whisky-and-soda in the lounge, listened with interest to their conversation—listened, tense and breathless with interest, when she learned that Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, now one of Pug Pounder's string, and earning his living by fighting in public, was here in Yelverbury, boxing in a booth.

Her Otho, now a professional bruiser.

And with what interest did Margaret listen when her brother began, with an air of puzzled injury, to discuss the extraordinary attitude which Otho had assumed toward him.

"Can't understand it a bit," he grumbled. "I've always been very nice to him."

"So I should hope," said Margaret.

"Well—I mean to say," Jack grumbled, "I've boxed him twice in public, and I simply went to box him again tonight. . . . He has no use for boxing, apparently, now—all he wanted was my blood and my life. . . . Said he was going to kill me. . . . I suppose he doesn't bear me a grudge for having defeated him twice."

"That's hardly worthy, Jack," said Margaret quietly.

Viscount Shannondale thought it advisable to get the conversation changed. He was very much in love with Margaret, but realised that Maligni the Magnificent was first in the field, and he had a stout suspicion that Otho Bellême was there long before the first.

"What a curious thing about that pocket-book, wasn't it?" he remarked.

"What was that?" asked Margaret, quickly taking the cue for changing the subject.

"Oh, I was holding Bellême's coat while he was in the ring, and a pocket-book fell out of it. Maligni picked it up, and, behold, it had a big 'J.M.' in gold letters on the cover. . . . I thought it was your brother's, but he knew nothing at all about it."

"Oh well, there are other J.M.'s besides Jack Maykings," smiled Margaret. "There's Joe Mummery for example."

"Wasn't at all the sort of article that a bruiser would be likely to possess: much more of a high-falutin' fandango. What one might call—well—what one might call a gentleman's pocket-book," said Jack.

"Thank you, Maykings," said Maligni. "It was a gentleman's pocket-book."

All eyes turned upon Maligni, who sat smiling inscrutably at his whisky-and-soda, as he lolled back in a deep chair.

"What do you mean, Julia?" asked Margaret.

"I merely assert, my dear Margey, that it was a gentleman's pocket-book.

"Because it was my pocket-book," he added quietly; and every one, in the classic phrase, "sat up and took notice," thereupon.

"Yours?" said Jack.

"Yes, mine," repeated Maligni.

"Then how did Otho come to have it?" asked Margaret and Jack simultaneously.

"That, I can only surmise," replied Maligni, with the air of one who can say very much more than he does.

"Oh, please, don't be mysterious, Julia," snapped Margaret. "If you know how it came into Otho's possession, for goodness' sake say so."

Shannondale intervened again.

"Oh, well," said he, "after all—I mean to say—'Much ado about nothing,' and all that."

"Quite so," agreed Maligni. "I'm more than willing to say no more about it."

"Well, look here, Julia, just get willing," said Margaret quickly. "Otho was my oldest and dearest friend, so clear up the mystery. You must have some theory as to how it happens that your wallet falls out of Otho's pocket."

"I'm afraid that the only theory that I can put forward is one that I don't care to put forward, Margery," said Maligni, a little pompously.

Margaret rose and stamped her foot in exasperation and anger, but, before she could speak, Jack smote his thigh and cried aloud:

"By Jove! Then what he said to me in the ring should have gone to your address perhaps, Maligni?"

"What did he say, my boy?" intervened Dr. Maykings, who had hitherto paid more attention to satisfying the needs of his inner man that he had to the conversation.

"Oh, some dam rot," replied Jack.

"Are you going to get mysterious too?" Margaret turned upon him angrily. "Have we all gone mad or what? What did he say?"

"Yes, what did he say, since it 'may have been meant for me'?" put in Maligni.

"Well, if you must have it," grumbled Jack, "when he had cursed me right viciously, and I had said *'What's up, Otho? I don't get you,'* he said,—and in a most appalling rage too, —*'No, and you didn't get poor little Victoria either, did you, you young beast?'*

"I make you a present of that and you can decide whether it is mysterious or not," he added.

"Good Heavens above us!" said Dr. Maykings.

"And pray might I inquire," said Maligni with elaborate courtesy, "precisely how you arrive at the opinion that whereas Bellême said this to you, he would more appropriately have said it to me?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . . Sorry," growled Jack. "I was connecting his apparently lunatic question with the possession of the pocket-book. . . . 'J.M.' . . . Jack Maykings. . . . Jules Maligni."

"Joe Mummery. . . . Jumping Moses. . . . Jerrubabel Montmorency-Featherstonehaugh," murmured Viscount Shannondale, from the depths of his chair.

Margaret looked indignant.

"And pray who might '*Victoria*' be?" she asked.

"That girl at his digs, at Oxford," answered Jack. "I told you about her. . . ."

"And pray how do you know the name of the servant-girl at Otho's lodgings?" asked Margaret.

"Oh, we all did," put in Shannondale hastily.

"Oh, yes. Everybody did," agreed Maligni.

"Why?" asked Margaret.

"Most beautiful young creature," replied Shannondale. "A lily on a dust-heap. One couldn't help noticing her."

"What could Otho have meant?" said Margaret.

"I can offer no suggestion," said Maligni. "And I can only thank Jack for his kind conclusion that Bellême's insinuation ought to have come to me."

"Well, he had your pocket-book, anyhow," Jack reminded him. "You have not explained that."

"I think it is rather for Bellême to explain, isn't it?" was the cold reply.

"Stop talking, all of you," cried Margaret. "Now Julia Maligni, if you'll kindly answer me one question, we can all cease this mean and beastly scandal-mongering and mind our own affairs instead of poor old Otho's."

"Poor old Otho!" put in Dr. Maykings, as he drained his glass. "Seems to me he's become a most disreputable young man, what with his servant-girls and other people's property, and this low booth-scrapping."

"Hold your tongue, Father," snapped Margaret, using words, tone and manner such as she had never before used to the Doctor, who stared open-mouthed.

She turned to Maligni.

"Now then," she said, "what's this theory of yours? How do you suppose your wallet came into Otho's possession?"

Maligni the Magnificent, under the influence of jealousy and no slight irritation, replied in the manner of Jack:

"Well, if you must have it," said he, "*I think he stole it,* —and I think it contained the sum of twenty-seven pounds and ten shillings, in 'fivers' and gold, when he did so.

" 'I make you a present of that, and you can decide whether it is mysterious or not,' as Jack remarked," he added.

Margaret's eyes blazed, her fists clenched, her sweet young face grew hard.

"Oh! . . ." she said. "Oh! . . . And I thought you were a gentleman, Jules Maligni. . . . I even thought . . .

"Otho? . . . Our Otho with whom we grew up? Our wonderful Otho, our playmate, our leader, our host? . . .

"No I won't defend him. . . . I'll merely laugh as I should laugh if you told me you firmly believed that he was a murderer, or a pickpocket, or a stealer of pennies from blind men and little children."

And Margaret did contrive to laugh.

"I say,—frightfully late, you know," said Shannondale, neatly stifling a yawn. "What about a bit of bed? I'm sure we're keeping Miss Maykings up."

"Bed," yawned Dr. Maykings, and they all rose.

As they trooped from the room, Maligni found that the last word had not been said.

"I'm very sorry to trouble you again when it is so late, Julie," she apologised icily, "but I should very much like to tell you something in return for what you told me."

"Why, certainly, my dear," said Maligni, as he turned back.

Margaret closed the door.

"Will you set aside all questions of punctilio, forbearance and polite evasion, Julie," she said, "and give me an absolutely plain truthful answer to a question? . . . Do that much for me, Julie. . . . It's rather important to me. . . . I think perhaps my whole faith in human nature depends on it."

"I will tell you the truth, Margaret," replied Maligni.

"Have you reason to believe, do you really believe, really in your heart of hearts, *that Otho stole from you?*"

"I have reason to believe, and I do believe, that Otho stole from me," was the reply.

Margaret told herself that Maligni, an honourable and truthful man, was of course mistaken.

"This servant-girl? This Victoria? Was it really she whom he brought to Tonbury?" she asked.

"Margaret, my dear," said Maligni. "Don't . . . Don't persist. . . . I . . ."

"Tell me, Julie," said the girl. "The more I know, the easier it will be for me to clear this up. I owe it to Otho, the best and dearest friend a child ever had. . . . Tell me, Julie."

"Margaret, my dear, I honestly do not know. But since

the truth means so much to you—I do know that he left Oxford with this same girl, Victoria, and that he has put her in the house of this boxing-booth fellow at Tonbury. Whether he lives there with her, I do not know. . . . He may have married her, Margaret."

And then, a feeling of jealousy overwhelming him once more, he added:

"I hope he is married to this girl—even if he did marry her on my money."

Margaret gasped.

Maligni thought that she was about to scourge him sharply, but he was wrong.

"You have been honest with me, Julie? You have told me the truth as you believe it?"

Maligni nodded slowly.

"Very well, Julie, listen. I believe you to be an honourable gentleman, and I apologise if I have hurt you by anything I have said to-night. . . . But let me tell you something—you're wrong, Julie. No bigger mistake was ever made by any human being. And I am going to prove it. . . . I shall go and see Otho myself, and get at the truth. . . . And you'll find that I am right. Oh, be assured of that."

"And if *I* am right, Margaret dear?"

"Oh, anything. If you are right, Julie . . . and he has really 'taken up' with this girl—anything. . . . I don't think I shall ever again believe in anyone . . . in this rotten world. . . ."

CHAPTER XIX

AND, that same evening, at the time when his character and conduct were under discussion at the house of Dr. Maykings, Otho received, and returned with warmth and abandon, the kiss of a woman, and she a married woman.

For as, at length, he made his way from the tent and the scene of his lightning victory, Mrs. Pounder flung her arms about his neck, pressed her lips warmly to his, and with a voice trembling with the deepest and truest emotion, said:

"Laddie, 'twas the sairest dunt these eyes ha'e ever seen," and, stifling a sniff with an aged but practicable black kid glove, she added:

"Ye're championship stuff, ma mannie, an' never ha'e I been mistaken yet."

Next morning, Otho informed the wildly enthusiastic Pug Pounder that he must take a holiday, or at any rate a part-holiday; as he intended to go to Tonbury forthwith.

"Take a week, my son. Take a month. Take 'alf a cent'ry. Only be back for the British Public to take a look at you to-night, if you can. . . . Bli'me, *I'll* give 'em some patter to-night! . . . The missis 'as already wrote 'er account for the *Tonbury Argus* about 'ow you knocked the former 'Eavy-Weight Champion of England to 'ell in one second."

"Dinna blaspheme, Mr. Poonder," interrupted Mrs. Pounder.

§ 2

Margaret Maykings was not of those who allow the grass to grow under their feet, and, on the following morning, she knocked at the door of Mr. Pounder's private residence.

"Well?" inquired the chatelaine, in non-committal voice, as she stood in the door-way and eyed the girl without hostility or cordiality.

"Oh—er—does Mr. Bellême live here, please?"

"Whiles," was the reply.

"Is he at home, please?" smiled Margaret.

"He isna'," replied Mrs. Pounder.

"Can you tell me when he will be home?" pursued Margaret.

"I canna," answered Mrs. Pounder, with brevity if not wit.

Margaret was nonplussed and hung a moment in doubt.

"Could you tell me when I should find him here?" Margaret tried again. "I can't very well go inquiring for him at the Fair-ground."

"I couldna'," was the prompt reply.

Mrs. Pounder gave away little, and parted reluctantly even with information. She hoarded both the gold of silence and the silver of speech.

Moreover, in addition to the intrinsic value of these hoards was that of sole managership of the future Heavy-weight Champion of the World; and this looked a most managing young lady. What did she want with Bob Blame? . . . Was this his other girl? . . . How many more—the young de'il? . . . A nice-looking lass and a leddy. . . . Better for him than this picking-and-stealing street-trapesing young fly-by-night he'd brought here. . . .

Ah, here she came! Let them fight it out, and perhaps between two fules he'd come to the ground—and plant his feet firmly on the way he should go—to World Championship.

Margaret turned, as an extremely pretty girl came up the steps, carrying a string bag in which a cabbage bulged.

This must be "the girl."

"Well, when he does come, will you kindly tell Mr. Bellême that I called, and particularly want to speak to him . . ." said Margaret, turning to Mrs. Pounder.

"And who might you be?" interrupted Victoria rudely.

". . . I am a very old friend of his," continued Margaret, ignoring the girl.

"And I am his young lady," asserted Victoria aggressively. "What do you want with him?"

Mrs. Pounder's eye met that of Margaret, and thought it beheld Romance.

"Aye," she said. "She is his young woman."

Let the young leddy grasp that fact. Mrs. Pounder would deal with the other girl later. The laddie should be free from them both.

"Anything you've got to say to him, you can say to me,"

continued Victoria. "I dunno s'much about you being his 'very old friend,' but I do know I'm his young lady, and that we're going to be married very soon. We was *friends,* at Oxford, and he brought me here to live, until he could marry me. Didn't he Mrs. Pounder?"

"Aye," said Mrs. Pounder grimly, staunch in her duty to herself and her lord, though pitying the young leddy the while.

"Well, I'm sorry to have troubled you," said Margaret brightly, and turned away. . . .

Oh, *Otho!* . . .

With overbright eyes and compressed lips, Margaret drove her little car back to Yelverbury at a pace which she did not consider dangerous.

So that was the end of Otho Bellême!

How could he? The wonderful hero of her childhood. Entangled with the servant-girl from his lodgings. . . . Engaged to her. . . . About to marry her. . . .

What had come to the boy? He could not have deteriorated to this depth merely through living in a plumber's shop in a Tonbury side-street?

Had he got into bad company? But then bad company would never have affected the Otho of her childish hero-worship.

Of course a servant-girl may be as worthy, admirable and attractive as anybody else, one of Nature's gentle-women, pure gold—but this girl wasn't. Pure brass, rather.

Attractive? Surely not, to a person of breeding and refinement. A badly rouged, over-powdered, weak-faced hussy, her mouth a crimson mess and, to be just, that was so utterly unnecessary, for she was an extraordinarily pretty girl, with really lovely eyes and hair.

Poor Otho! To be so cheaply ensnared.

Poor Otho, indeed? Beastly Otho! Unworthy Otho! How swiftly and terribly he had gone down-hill. One could almost believe that pocket-book nonsense. . . . That was just Julie's jealousy. . . . But Brutus is an honourable man, and swears he left the pocket-book in Otho's sitting-room—and here it is in Otho's possession. How could that be explained? But Heavens above, *Otho!* A common thief, robbing his friend. Absurd!

Julie's word against Otho's? Which would she take? Otho's, of course. But how did he come to be in possession of the wretched thing?

Julie? Otho? Could it be possible that Julie was an arrant liar and had given the pocket-book to the girl—for some reason best known to himself?

No, absurd. . . . And if so, what was Otho doing with it?

But then again, they said last night that Otho thought, or pretended to think, that it was Jack's. . . . Then in that case, he must have stolen it. Anyhow it was a most fishy business, and either Otho or the girl, or the pair of them, had had Julie's money.

Otho, a thief! "Walking out" with . . .

And here he came, walking. . . .

Margaret was sorely tempted to accelerate and pass him, head in air, and with a glance that showed she had seen him.

But Margaret, though angry, hurt and piqued, was just, and Otho should be given a chance of saying anything he might wish to say.

She slowed down, and the car stopped, as Otho, swinging along at a great pace and in the direction of Tonbury, raised his cap.

How handsome he looked! How fine and clean and strong. What a nice face. . . . But getting a little hard and bitter until he smiled. . . . Dear 'Tho. . . . It couldn't be true. But Mrs. Pounder had confirmed it. He was living with the girl and going to marry her.

"Good morning, Margaret," smiled Otho, flushing warmly.

"Oh, I am so glad I've met you, 'Tho. I've just been to look for you," cried Margaret impetuously.

"At the Fair-ground?"

"No. I've been to your lodgings, or rather your *pied à terre,* as you're a bird of passage. . . . And was vouchsafed speech, succinct and terse, with your Mrs. Pounder."

"One of the very best," commented Otho.

"Yes. No doubt. . . . And the girl. . . . I went because I wanted to ask you something important. . . . That pocket-book with J.M. on it. . . ."

"What?" ejaculated Otho incredulously.

Margaret's level gaze searched Otho's face. He had flinched, almost paled . . . was utterly disconcerted.

"How on earth did you find out?" whispered Otho, alluding to Jack's supposed villainy.

"Jack told me," replied Margaret, alluding to the stolen note-case, her face hardening as doubt grew towards certainty.

"The young swine!" said Otho angrily. "To tell you about it! . . . I'd have given anything to have kept this from you, Margaret. I can't tell you how sorry . . ."

"Sorry!" cried Margaret, and starting up her car left him standing and staring.

"Well, I'm damned," said Otho. "That's the reward I get for shouldering the trouble *her* brother brought on Victoria Bate!" . . .

And . . . "Well, I'd never have believed it," said Margaret, accelerating wildly. *"'How did I find out about the pocket-book'* indeed! Of course he would rather have kept it from me! . . . And Jack's a young swine for telling me you're a thief, is he, Otho Bellême! . . .

"And that's the end of *you,"* she added, as she ran over a chicken—but it was not to the unfortunate fowl that the remark was addressed.

§ 3

Thus it was not in the gentlest and kindest frame of mind that Otho entered the house that sheltered Miss Victoria Bate, with the intention of inviting her forthwith to clear up two mysteries—her possession of Jack Maykings' note-case and also of Mrs. Pounder's marked money and other property.

Was it possible that the girl really did not know Jack's name? No. Almost certainly she knew his name, and, if she did not, she could with the utmost ease have indicated him for Otho's identification. Then why had she shielded him? And why had the fellow been fool and cad enough to have told Margaret about it? And now that Margaret knew, Jack should straightway deal with the situation and make whatever provision seemed best to him for the disposal of Victoria Bate.

It was one thing to suffer infinite annoyance, some disgrace, and a certain amount of heart-ache to save Margaret and her family, but it was quite another to let these continue after they had been rendered vain and useless.

Since Jack had seen fit to confess, let him carry on and complete the good work. . . . After confession, reparation. . . . Victoria Bate's future was now Jack's affair.

And suppose Jack refused to do anything at all in the matter? Then obviously Otho Bellême's promise to the girl must be redeemed. *I Saye and I Doe.* . . .

Victoria answered his knock.

"Hullo!" said Victoria.

"Good morning, Victoria," replied Otho. "Is Mrs. Pounder in?"

"No, she's just gone to the butcher's."

"Oh, well. . . . It's you I've come to see, Victoria. Come into the parlour a minute."

Victoria glanced at him warily, a speculative look upon her face, as Otho closed the door of the room.

"Well, Victoria," he said. "You'd have saved a lot of trouble if you'd told me the man's initials were *J.M.* and that he was Mr. Jack Maykings," and he put his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat.

"What are you talking about?" asked Victoria, in obvious puzzlement.

"This," replied Otho, and held out the note-case.

Victoria recoiled, and her face flushed scarlet from neck to hair.

"*Christ!*" she whispered, shrinking from him. "Where did you get that? . . . What a fool I been not to burn it! . . ."

Otho stood silent, his face stern, contemptuous and bitter, and the contempt that he felt was not only for the girl and the owner of the pocket-case.

What a fool he'd been! A fool and a tool!

"Where did I get it?" he said. "Where did you get it, is more to the point. . . . I'll tell you where you got it, Victoria. You got it from its owner, Mr. Jack Maykings. And why on earth couldn't you have said so? . . . Why on earth couldn't you have told me that it was he who got you into trouble?"

"Got me into trouble? . . . What d'you mean—got me into trouble?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. Didn't it all begin by my finding you trying to commit suicide because some one had got you into trouble and you dared not face . . ."

Victoria gasped.

"What? Me?" she screamed. "You low, nasty-minded, lying hound. . . . Me! . . . Trouble! . . . How dare you—you wicked dirty-minded . . ." and the girl burst into a flood of tears of most genuine anger.

Otho stared in amazement.

"You beastly liar!" blubbered the girl.

Otho looked from the note-case to the contorted and disfigured face of Victoria Bate.

"Does this case belong to Mr. Jack Maykings or does it not?" he said angrily.

Victoria blew her nose violently.

"'Ow the 'ell do *I* know?" she said between sobs.

"Did he give it to you, or did he not?" pursued Otho.

"He did not," shouted Victoria. "I don't know him from Adam, and don't want."

"You don't know him? You never went to his lodgings?"

"Look here! You insult me again, you cowardly 'ound, and I'll . . . I'll . . ."

"You never went to his lodgings, and he never spoke to you in mine! . . . He didn't give it to you! . . . Then obviously you *stole* it, Victoria."

"You're a liar. . . . I—found it."

"Where?"

"In your sitting-room—at Mother Thynne's. On the little table."

Otho heaved a sigh.

"I see," he said. "I begin to understand. You 'found' it like you 'found' Mrs. Pounder's money and jewellery and stockings."

"And how do you know that, you peeping, prying, sneaking, lying . . ."

"Oh, shut up, Victoria. And for your own sake, speak the truth for once. . . . It's your only chance, I warn you. How much was in the case when you 'found' it?"

"Twenty-seven quid," sniffled Victoria sullenly.

"Good lord! And the amount frightened you, I suppose. . . . The police. . . . And that was why you were committing suicide—or pretending to."

"I wasn't pretending to. And I'll do it yet. You bully me any more, and there'll be an inquest on me termorrer—and you'll be shown up."

"Oh, I shall be shown up, eh? All my villainy come to light. . . ."

"Insulting a respectable girl," sobbed Victoria. . . .

"You call stealing respectable, eh?" said Otho.

"A sight more respectable than what you thought. . . . I wouldn't have a mind like yours . . ."

"Hold your tongue. I want to think a minute."

"You send for the police and I'll cut me throat before they come. I'll write a letter first saying what you . . . I've got it wrote already, I tell you."

"Will you be quiet a minute. . . ."

Jack Maykings! What was it Margaret had said?

"I went to your lodgings because I wanted to ask you something very important. . . . That pocket-book with J.M. on it. . . . Jack told me. . . ."

Now what did that imply! Obviously Margaret knew about Jack's pocket-book. What did she know, and how did she know it? The pocket-book had come straight from Victoria's trunk to the boxing-booth. How on earth could Margaret know anything about it? Of course, Jack must have told her that he had left it in Otho's rooms and never seen it again! . . .

A great light suddenly shone on Otho's mind and he winced and shrank before its blinding brilliance.

Jack supposed that *he,* Otho, had found it and kept it—and Jack had told Margaret . . . told all of them. . . .

And Margaret had believed it!

Otho looked at Victoria Bate snivelling on the sofa, and his nervous fingers flexed tensely.

They believed that he was a thief!

They couldn't. . . . And if they did . . . let them.

Let them. . . .

That matter would keep for the moment—but he must, of course, write and apologise to Jack Maykings for what he had said to him in the ring. . . . Almost funny, that. . . . *"Did you 'get' poor little Victoria Bate at Oxford? Did you, you young beast!"*—Jack, himself the victim! Jack who supposed, not altogether without reason, that Otho had robbed him! Poor old Jack, what must he think? No wonder he told Margaret! . . .

Victoria rose from the sofa.

And now what was to be done with this creature—a born liar and thief, and almost certainly of inherited suicidal tendency?

The obvious thing was to hand her over to the police and leave it to Jack Maykings to prosecute. Doubtless Mrs. Pounder would prosecute too.

But the idea was absolutely revolting. A curious way of keeping a solemn promise to "stand by the girl in her trouble," and get her out of it if he could.

On the other hand, it was hardly fair either to Jack or Mrs. Pounder. He had no wish to indulge in vicarious magnanimity. . . .

The sound of a key in the front door lock. Mrs. Pounder. A wise woman of excellent counsel. He would forthwith tell her the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Going out into the narrow passage, he closed the parlour door behind him and locked it.

"Can you spare a few minutes, Mrs. Pounder?" he said.

"Aye," answered the lady.

Mrs. Pounder led the way to the kitchen, placed her bonnet upon the table, took a chair, and motioned Otho to another.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, Mrs. Pounder," he began. "I feel thoroughly ashamed of myself for bringing this annoyance and unpleasantness upon you. . . . It's a miserable business. . . ."

"Aye," said Mrs. Pounder.

"Well—first of all, I want to make good the losses you've had through your kindness in taking Victoria in. . . ."

"Aye," said Mrs. Pounder.

"I'm going to tell you the whole truth of the matter, and then I'm going to throw myself on your mercy, and ask for your advice and help . . . your continued help, I mean. . . . That seems awful cheek, I know, but it's really a compliment—for you're one of the best and kindest women who . . ."

"Aye," said Mrs. Pounder.

"It's like this. . . . Victoria is absolutely nothing whatsoever to me. . . . She was the servant at my lodgings at Oxford. . . . I found her in the act of committing suicide. . . . In most frightful trouble. . . ."

"Aye," said Mrs. Pounder.

". . . The nature of which I misunderstood. . . ."

"Aye," said Mrs. Pounder.

"But there's no possible doubt that she really was committing suicide. . . . In the very act of taking poison. . . ."

"Hoots!" said Mrs. Pounder.

"She *was,*" asseverated Otho, "and she has a hereditary suicidal tendency. . . . Family habit. . . . Well, to keep her from it, and literally to save her life, I gave her my solemn promise that I would stand by her and see her through. . . . Stick to her until she was out of the wood. . . ."

"Aye," said Mrs. Pounder.

"Her mistress was a horrible woman, and I felt certain the girl would kill herself if I left her there. . . . The very day I came here from Oxford, I met Mr. Pounder at the Station. . . . We had gone there for a meal, as my people would not take her in. . . . I told Mr. Pounder the truth and we brought her here. . . . We deceived you . . ."

"Ye didna," said Mrs. Pounder.

"Well. . . . It appears I was entirely wrong about Victoria's trouble, and, as she has been robbing you, there is no harm in my telling you, in confidence, that she'd been stealing. . . . A friend of mine must either have left, or dropped, that note-case in my sitting-room—or perhaps left it in his overcoat pocket, hanging in the hall. . . . Twenty-seven pounds in it. . . . Victoria must have thought she was found out. . . ."

"Aye," said Mrs. Pounder.

"Well, the point is, she would have committed suicide then, and she will commit suicide now, if we prosecute, or even turn her out."

"Hoots!" said Mrs. Pounder.

"She *will,* I tell you. . . . I'm certain of it. . . . You didn't see her as I did. . . ."

"Indeed, no," said Mrs. Pounder.

". . . And I know she'll do it if it's a case of the police. . . . And moreover I gave her my promise. . . . So what on earth am I to do? . . . What's to become of the girl? . . . If you turn her out, where on earth will she go?"

"The streets," said Mrs. Pounder.

"Exactly," replied Otho.

A sombre silence fell in the little kitchen.

"I know I've been a . . ."

Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! asserted the kitchen clock twelve times.

Mrs. Pounder smiled drily.

"Aye," she said.

Silence again. . . . A silence that, to Otho, grew irksome and oppressive, as he watched the dour forbidding face of Mrs. Pounder.

Silence. . . .

Mrs. Pounder heaved a deep sigh.

"Leave her to me, laddie," she said at length. "I'll not turn her out. . . . I'll not be unkind to the besom. . . . I'll try and keep her on the path o' virtue. . . . In shorrt, I'll do ma best. . . .

". . . An' ye'll pay weel for onything she steals," added Mrs. Pounder. *"Aye!"*

Otho arose, and, without a word, took Mrs. Pounder by the shoulders and kissed her soundly.

"Ye young de'il," murmured Mrs. Pounder.

§ 4

Meanwhile Margaret Maykings returned home, put her car away, and strolled about the garden in moody thought.

Catching sight of her brother and Jules Maligni, she called to them.

"I've been to seen Otho," she said, without preamble. "I went to that Pounder address in the Tonbury Directory. . . . Apparently it is Otho's headquarters. . . . That girl does live there. . . . He's going to marry her. . . . The woman of the house said so. . . . I met Otho on the way back. . . . I asked him about the pocket-book. . . . All he could say was that you were a swine for telling me about it. . . . I can't understand what's come to Otho. . . ."

"His father was an awful rotter, of course," observed Jack.

"Yes, but Otho wasn't," snapped Margaret.

"Margaret," broke in Maligni, "isn't he living with the servant-girl from his Oxford lodgings? . . . Wasn't he found in possession of my wallet which I left, full of money, in his rooms? . . . I can see it as plainly as if it were being enacted before me now. . . . I dropped in at his place about tea-time, on some business about the boxing—a list of names

and weights and so on—and he wasn't at home. Victoria said he would be in at any minute now, and his tea was on the table. . . . He didn't come. . . . I took the case from the breast-pocket of my jacket to find the list, and laid it on a little low table beside the chair.

"When I had waited a while, I put the list half under his teapot, where he would see it, and walked out. . . .

"Do you know that when I missed that note-case I could not think what had become of it! . . . I rather suspected my old scout, Albertross, I am afraid. . . . I had clean forgotten taking it out of my pocket and putting it on that little table—and it flashed into my mind, extraordinarily enough, the moment I saw the thing fall from the pocket of his mackintosh."

"Why," suddenly interrupted Margaret. "That girl! Victoria. . . . She found it and stole it. . . . It was she who . . ."

"Yes! And what is Otho doing with it?" sneered Maligni. "That doesn't help much, I'm afraid. . . . Isn't the receiver supposed to be worse than the thief? . . . Anyhow—can we get away from the fact that I left the money in Bellême's room and I find the case in Bellême's pocket—after he has gone off with the girl of the place? . . . Besides, he's living with her, and going to marry her, Margaret. . . . He has gone out of your life. . . . He has gone on to another plane altogether. . . ."

"Julie—he was our dear friend. . . ."

"He was. . . . And what is he now? A thief, a fair-ground bruiser, a rotter, living with the servant-girl he decoyed from his lodgings. . . ."

"Yes, and then accuses me of some mysterious crime in connection with her!" agreed Jack, and with a snort of disgust he turned on his heel and went off.

Jules Maligni stroked his chin as he studied Margaret's face.

The swing of the pendulum? Striking while the iron is hot?

"Margery," he said, "facts are facts. . . . Face them. . . . Chuck it all, and marry me. . . . You know I love you, and have loved you all my life. . . . Marry me and we'll go to Morocco. . . . You'd love every hour of it. . . ."

"Oh, don't bother me now, Julie. . . . Thanks awfully.

. . . I'll think about it," replied Margaret, and turned away.

That night she wrote to Otho, telling him that she was certain that there was some stupid mistake, and begging him to write and tell her all about it—he owed it to her, his oldest friend, for she believed in him, admired him and trusted him absolutely. Hadn't that girl stolen the pocket-book? . . .

Miss Victoria Bate, picking up the letter from the door-mat, next morning, read it with much amusement, and burnt it with much pleasure.

Margaret waited hopefully for a week and then listened wearily to the urgings of Jules Maligni.

CHAPTER XX

ROSIE MAYKINGS was an anxious and troubled woman as, according to her custom, she went for her good-night chat with her adored and only daughter. The best-laid schemes of mice and women are apt to fail, and often through the failure of those whom they concern. So long, and so undoubtedly had Mrs. Maykings, in her heart of hearts, regarded her Margaret as the future Lady Mandeville-Bellême—lady of a redeemed Castle and broad lands, redeemed by the brave and noble efforts of her loved and admired Otho—that the news of his downfall had come as a heavy blow to her. She had suffered, herself, and for herself—she had suffered through her daughter and for her daughter, and was only now dimly realising the bitter disappointment.

How could Otho do such a thing? How could he have deteriorated so terribly and so quickly? How could she have been so mistaken in him? What was at the root of it? Bad company at Oxford? Contamination during years of the society of his mother's relations? That notorious young woman, his cousin? The plumber; the pugilist; a general weakening of fibre, lowering of standards and deterioration of character? Or was it his poor father's taint and weakness beginning to show?

Jules Maligni and Margaret. . . . Jules Maligni, instead of Sir Otho Mandeville-Bellême. Jules Maligni, son of Señor Pedro Maligni whom they had known so many years, and of whom they knew so very little, and whose wife they had never seen. But it wasn't Pedro Maligni and his Moorish wife that were in question. It was Jules. . . . Jules whom they did know, and had known from the days when, a sallow, black-eyed, pathetic boy, he had attended the same Prep. School as Jack, and had spent most of his holidays at their house.

Where was it she had first met Señor Pedro Maligni?

At Algeciras, of course—or was it Ronda, when she and Matty had been in Spain, on their honeymoon. He had been staying with Sir Otho Mandeville-Bellême at the hotel. Sir Otho had been having what he termed "some perfect pig-sticking" in Morocco; and, at the Club at Tangier, had met Señor Pedro Maligni. The two had become great friends, and the Señor had visited Yelverbury Castle when he came to England, where he seemed to have frequent business—at Birmingham. Apparently he had, for a time, interested Sir Otho, a keen yachtsman, in this mysterious business. He had also cultivated Dr. Maykings somewhat, until he found that the doctor's interests did not include yachting. The Señor had puzzled Matty not a little, with his cryptic references to opportunities for making a lot of money—provided one had nerve and a sea-worthy boat. A curious but charming gentleman. . . . Years later they had seen him again at Gibraltar. He had come over from Tangier, and they had gone back with him for a visit to Morocco. He had given them a lovely time, and his hospitality had been so lavish and overwhelming that they had been only too delighted to take young Jules home with them, and deliver him safely at the Prep. School they strongly recommended.

Yes, they knew Jules well enough, and knew nothing against him. Of course he was a "foreigner"—a Spanish Moor presumably. But he was very charming, and—of course that did not weigh at all—he was obviously very wealthy. . . . Yes, his father was certainly a very rich man.

Margaret and Jules Maligni? . . . Very, very different—however one regarded it—from Margaret and Sir Otho Mandeville-Bellême. . . . Well, there it was. . . . Otho had disgraced himself, dragged a noble name in the mud. . . . Well, no, perhaps not that—yet? . . . Anyhow, he was gone, obliterated, vanished—dead as a hundred doornails, so far as her hopes of his marriage with Margaret were concerned.

Always there had been an Otho. . . . Now there was no Otho. . . . Jules Maligni instead. . . . Jules—charming, polished, wealthy. . . . One must not be sordid and mercenary, but facts are facts, and life is life. And Matty lived well up to his income. . . . There wouldn't be much for Margaret when Jack was launched in life. . . .

No, her duty was clear. She must support Jules, now

that Margaret had accepted him—however unenthusiastically. . . . When one could not have one's best, one must make the best of the second best. . . .

Mrs. Maykings opened the door of her daughter's room, and saw Margaret thrust her handkerchief beneath her pillow.

"I am so glad, darling," she murmured, as she took the girl in her arms, her deep mother-love prompting the lie.

"I'm not, Rosie," whispered the girl.

"I'm sure you'll be happy, darling," continued Mrs. Maykings.

"I'm not, Mother," replied her daughter.

"You'll come to love Jules, my darling, just as you loved Otho."

"Don't talk nonsense, Mother dearest. Let's be honest. I love Otho desperately."

"But, my child, Otho has behaved shamefully—disgracefully. He has shown himself utterly unworthy of your friendship. Don't let us talk about him."

"I don't want to, Mother."

"No, let us talk about Jules."

"I don't know that I want to talk about Jules either, Mother."

"But darling, let me say how glad I am that you are going to be wise and sensible. I know you too well to fear that you would let a bad man spoil your life."

"Jules, Mother?"

"Jules is not a bad man, darling, and he will not spoil your life. What I mean is that I know you have far too much pride and good sense to let your life be spoilt because Otho is not what we thought him. You are not the sort of girl to spend the rest of her life crying over spilt milk, nor crying for the moon. If Otho was so blind . . . stupid . . . mad . . . wicked . . . as to throw away—what he has thrown away—Jules isn't. . . . And Jules has loved you all the time."

"The trouble is that I haven't loved Jules, Mother."

"Love will come, darling. Love comes."

Margaret smiled wearily.

"You will have a happy . . ."

"I'll have a twelve months' engagement anyhow, Mother."

"That's very long, darling."

"Two years is longer still, Mother. I think I'll make it three."

"A very severe test of Jules' affection, darling."

"True, Rosie Posie, a bright idea."

"Now you're talking absurdly, Margaret."

"Yes, Mother, and I am acting absurdly in promising to marry a man whom I don't love, but as you say, I have a little wicked pride, thank God. . . . No, I don't think I'll enter a nunnery, nor buy a Shetland shawl, a cameo brooch, mittens and springside boots, and settle down with a cat and a canary. I'll marry Jules—perhaps, some day. . . . When I've got over this. . . . And don't see Otho everywhere . . . and hear his voice all the while . . . and think of him all day and nearly all night. . . . But I'm not going to live and die an old maid because Otho Bellême wouldn't have me. That would be silly. . . . Good-night, Rosie-Nose. . . ."

PART IV

CHAPTER I

AS he lay on a long and comfortable couch in his dressing-room, Otho indulged, unconsciously, in a little auto-suggestion.

"I will beat Joe Mummery in this fight . . . *'I Saye and I Doe,'*" he said. "When my body cannot pick itself up, my will shall pick it up and keep it going, so that I hit and guard automatically. . . . Until I am wholly insensible and unconscious, I shall fight desperately but coolly. . . . And I will not be rendered insensible and unconscious, for my mind shall refuse to leave my body—my will shall keep it active in my brain. . . . Nor will I take the slightest notice of the five thousand spectators. . . . I will think and behave and function as though Joe and I were in Pug Pounder's booth. . . . And I will be cool and cautious, and fight with my brain. . . . And I will defeat Joe, for I am quicker than he is. . . . Speed must be my trump-card, and everything done by me must be quicker than anything done by Joe."

Mr. Pounder sat on a chair that creaked loudly beneath his weight. "Mouth all right? Not sticky? . . . Suck a lemon?" he asked.

"All's well," replied Otho, and lay breathing deeply until the call came. . . .

Seated in the chair in his corner of the ring, Otho had the sensation of being a tiny insect on a tiny island in the middle of a vast and brilliant sea.

The interior of the building looked colossal and it seemed that circle upon circle of human beings spread and widened and extended concentrically from himself to an infinitely distant line where a vast encircling wall met an immeasurable ceiling.

He lay back, his head against the padded post, his arms resting along the upper ropes, his legs spread laxly before

him. . . . He watched Joe—whom the spectators had cheered heartily, with cheers both long and loud.

Some one was talking through a megaphone. Famous giants of the ring were being presented to the public; great men who pathetically offered to fight anybody, anywhere, any when, for any amount.

The public was cheering each of them, in the kindly and friendly way of the British Public, who always wished the loser better luck next time, while it congratulated the winner on his good luck that time. . . . So long as a man played a clean game bravely and well, he was sure of the goodwill and support of the British Public. . . .

More talk through the megaphone. . . . Spinning the evening out—for fear Joe should win in about seventy seconds, when they did start!

And then his warm dressing-gown was taken from him, the gloves were fastened on to his well-bandaged hands, the Referee examined the gloves to see that they did not contain foreign bodies, such as chunks of lead, and he was again seated and awaiting the word.

Once more he studied Joe. . . . What a powerful mass of muscle he was! . . . What a fighter's head and neck! . . . What shoulders, arms and chest! . . . And what a face of carven oak—hard, expressionless, terrible as the stone face of some relentless cruel god in a heathen temple.

Well—two years ago Joe had called him coward, scoundrelly fight-seller, one who double-crossed his trainer and backer, temperamental, a boxer who could not fight, and he had maintained a contemptuous and inimical attitude ever since.

Joe should see some fighting as well as some boxing tonight, and if he acquitted himself well against Joe, Joe would be the first to admire and to admit it. Joe would withdraw his insults, and own that he had been wrong. If he beat Joe, there was no telling what lengths Joe would go, in his desire to make amends and show contrition of heart.

When would that chattering fool get out of the ring and let them begin.

A big man, in evening dress, was loudly telling another that he'd never seen a finer specimen than Otho, and that Youth will be served.

"Quite so," replied the other. "Damn badly served, if I

know anything of Joe Mummery—and I've seen him in most of his battles. . . . He was an A.B. on my ship when he was Champion Heavy-Weight of the Navy."

"How old is he then?" inquired the first speaker.

"About thirty-six I should say," was the reply.

"Well—if he's thirty-six and this lad's about twenty-one or so," commented the big man, "he'll have to be smart. . . . It's a bit old for defending a Championship title. Especially if Blame is the human-lightning that we're led to expect. . . . Ever seen him at work?"

"No. I couldn't get away to see him win the great fight that enabled him to go for the British Heavy-Weight title. . . . Always regretted it too. . . . But if he's what they say, we shall see a *fight* to-night—not three steps, a smack, and a fall-down for the count."

"Yes," thought Otho, they should certainly see a fight to-night, whatever the result.

§ 2

"Seconds out of the ring!"
"Time!"

And Otho rose, met Joe in the centre of the ring, shook both Joe's hands between his own, smiled, and with a merry "Put 'em up, Joe," fell back and assumed his boxing position, upright, head high, both hands advanced, and feet broadly planted, his weight on his toes, almost.

Joe stood before him, his hands near his face, his body bent slightly forward, somewhat crouched, and yet with very little loss of height. Otho felt that it was a little unfair to Joe that he should have boxed with him so often as to feel that he now knew precisely what Joe would do.

Still—Joe need not do it, and if his style were stereotyped, so much the worse for him as Champion.

Joe was circling slowly to his left, making a weaving motion with his left hand. . . . Yes. In a moment that left hand would fly forward and, as it was parried, a terrible right would come over—and it would be a fight-finishing blow, too, if it got home on the point of the jaw at which it was aimed.

The left shot forward, the right followed, and, crouching beneath them both, Otho struck a mighty blow under Joe's breastbone, and, rising from his swift duck, smashed Joe heavily on the mouth, and leapt out of reach.

A splendid beginning! He had out-boxed Joe that time —and he would out-fight him too.

Joe rushed, leading a swift left aud guarding with his right. Otho moved his head, shot out a long straight anticipatory left, again on Joe's mouth, jerking his head back; and as Joe's guard went up, Otho's right shot with a sharp thud, heavy and cruel, upon Joe's mark—and again Otho sprang away.

There was a spontaneous cheer from the thrilled spectators.

"What did I tell you?" said the Colonel to the Naval Officer, who made no reply.

Otho thought that it was now time that he took the aggressive, for, if he were not knocked out, the more he was on the aggressive, the more chance he would have of winning the fight on points.

Suddenly he feinted with his right, led a fine straight left that Joe guarded, aimed a right that Joe dodged, and found himself with his chin on Joe's shoulder and his fists beating a terrific tattoo on Joe's lower ribs. No useless hampered punches, but terrible short-arm jabs with bent elbows and the arms working from the shoulder-joints, powerfully driven by his great specially-developed triceps and deltoid muscles. . . . And he had got in a dozen before Joe had properly covered up, or returned a punch. . . . Poor Joe was doubling up. . . . Shrinking back. . . . Crouching. . . . And out of the poor shrinking huddle that was Joe, there suddenly swung an upper-cut that laid Otho flat on his back, feeling as though a bomb had burst in his head.

"What did I tell you?" said the Naval Officer to the Colonel.

"One . . . Two . . . Three . . ."

"Time!"

And Otho's seconds sprang upon him, hauled him up, and dragged him to his chair.

Here Harris squeezed a large sponge, containing cold water, upon his head, while Sturge violently massaged his legs and arms. Harris then filled his capacious mouth with water and spurted it forth in a fine and fountain-like stream upon Otho's head, face and chest; and Sturge wielded a large towel with fierce energy, fanning his principal. Otho opened his eyes.

A nasty one that. . . . Probably only *"Time"* had saved him. . . . Nonsense! He had distinctly heard, *"One . . . Two . . . Three . . ."* and was in the act of forcing his will to galvanize his mind and drive his body, when the call of *"Time"* had allowed him to relax and fall back into semi-consciousness. . . . Of course he'd have been up and busy long before *"Nine"* was called and the terrible "OUT!" announced that the presumptuous and impudent boy had been beaten in the first round by the great Heavy-Weight Champion of England.

"Rattled, Bob?" inquired Mr. Pounder from below and behind him.

"Of course not! Why?" replied Otho.

"Good boy," commended Mr. Pounder. "Mrs. Pounder says you can win, Bob, if you don't get too cocky and careless and pleased with yerself. . . . The ole gel says you can win on points if you keeps on bustlin' 'im an' don't mix it. . . . She says, *'Attack and attack and attack, and then do some attackin'—but keep out of in-fightin'.'* . . . Tip an' run, you know. . . . *'An' keep on working that straight left till 'is face caves in,'* she says."

"What? Is Mrs. Pounder inside?" asked Otho.

"Why—course she is! What d'yer think?" replied Mr. Pounder. "And keepin' the score as well as the blinkin' Referee hisself. She says you're well a'ead on points, first round, Bob. . . . 'E only really *'it* you once."

"Yes. . . . It was quite a good once, though," replied Otho.

Pride goeth before a fall! Who was he to stand toe to toe with Joe Mummery at in-fighting? Who was he deliberately to "mix it" with the greatest of all Heavy-Weight Champions of England, a man with twenty years of ring-craft and a body like an oak-tree?

A fool! A young, presumptuous hopeless fool—one of the thousands who get so far and no farther. So far as early luck and conceit take them—no farther than their second fight with a Champion-form fighter.

§ 3

"Seconds out of the ring!"
"Time!"

And he was again facing Joe, an unperturbed, unhurried Joe, unmarked and expressionless of face.

"Come on, Joe," said Otho, as he had said it a thousand times before in Joe's boxing shed. Joe came on, and Otho stopped him with a straight left and hit him very hard over the heart.

Otho sprang to one side as Joe rushed, and struck him a terrific blow on the side of the head as Joe passed him, and then, ducking below a vicious swing, planted two very telling blows, thudding and heavy, below Joe's breastbone. Joe gasped and upper-cut Otho, sending him crashing to the boards. . . .

Joe leant against a ring-post and breathed very deeply, while every eye watched Otho.

" One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four . . ."

The seconds were loudly shouted into the perfect silence of that vast building, a silence broken by the rustle of relief as five thousand men were glad when they saw the weaker man refuse defeat. . . . Otho raised his body, then, his weight on one hand, and in the attitude of the Dying Gladiator, strove to keep his body from collapsing. . . . A mighty effort. . . .

"Five . . . Six . . . Seven . . ."

No good. . . . No earthly power could get these leaden limbs to move, cause this spinning head to steady itself, enable this body to rise to its feet, lift its hands and strike a blow.

"Eight . . ." A mightier effort yet. No earthly power could do it.

Then let spiritual power succeed. Let his will drive his mind to make his body move, whether it could move or not. . . . Curse the miserable frail beaten body. . . . Let it obey the orders of the mind, the servant of the will. . . . Up. . . . *"Up, Bellême.* . . . Up with you, wretched carcass." . . . And as Otho heard the word *"Nine . . ."* he found himself on his feet, his hands raised, and his brain clear enough to know that Joe would now administer by way of *coup de grâce,* his terrible right upper-cut to the point of the jaw. . . . Still giddy, but gaining power with every second, Otho instinctively or intuitively timed and dodged that same upper-cut—which was to have ended the fight then and there. At precisely the same time, he put all his remaining strength,

and all his heavy weight, into an upward right-hand blow which found Joe's chin and sent him staggering—and, as Joe raised his left foot and checked with his right, to end the little staggering run, Otho caught him again on the mouth and, so much had Joe been off his balance in that second, sent him down far more heavily than Otho himself had yet fallen. And in the very act of Joe's falling, Otho struck him a terrible blow beneath the ear.

The vast assembly rose with one spontaneous cheer, and so did Joe with one spontaneous grin. In a fraction of a second after Joe's hands left the floor, Otho was upon him with a straight left to the face and a terrific drive to the "mark." . . . Again he sent a straight left that jerked Joe's head back, and brought off a smashing right hook—just as the shout of *"Time"* saved Joe from what was arranged for him.

A good round that, thought Otho.

"Your man will have to produce a knock-out, or he'll lose on points," observed the Colonel to the Naval Officer.

"He'll produce it all right," answered the Naval Officer. "I admit the other man's a holy boxer, but Mummery's bound to put him to sleep soon. Wait till Mummery hits him."

"I am," replied the Colonel. "Would you care to make a small bet?"

"I am not an ensanguined robber," replied the Naval Officer.

"No, you're a very wise man," agreed the Colonel.

Mrs. Pounder sent a message to Otho that, so far, he was easily the winner. . . . Many points ahead. . . . And it was points he was to box for—not a knock-out, for he couldn't do it—whereas Joe Mummery could. . . . No in-fighting. . . . No mixing it. . . . And not to forget he'd a punch in each hand.

Otho lay back and listened to Mr. Pounder and then to old Harris.

"Don't waste no more o' your strength on 'is 'ead, son," advised the old fighter. "Go for the body all the time. . . . Joe ain't so young as 'e was. . . . You gotter win on wind—an' points. . . . Let Joe tire 'isself, God 'elpin' 'im. . . . And you 'elp 'im too . . ." and much more good advice.

Otho said nothing and thought the more. Brains beat

brawn. He had his own plan of battle, his own strategy and his own tactics.

He was going to surprise Joe again, as he had already done, most mightily. He was going, if possible, to increase Joe's respect for him. Then he was going to tire and wilt and fade and become feeble. And Joe was going to become uplifted and say, "What does this rash youth here?" And Joe was going to become careless and over-confident, and then . . . something either would or would not happen.

§ 4

In the third round, Otho certainly "bustled" Joe to some purpose, and certain of the more travelled spectators were reminded of the merry game of death played by the matador with the bull.

To others, Otho was like a harlequin, but a very dangerous one of steel and whalebone. His speed was unprecedented and incredible, for a Heavy-Weight. He was as quick and active as the quickest and most active of Fly-Weights. His foot-work evoked the admiration of the connoisseurs, and his cool, clever ducking, dodging, side-stepping and swift evasion called forth rounds of cheers.

Suddenly, just before the gong went, he came to an abrupt standstill and drove so true and straight and heavy a left, followed by so terrible a right hook, that Mummery went down like a pole-axed ox and many there were who held that he was only saved by *"Time,"* which was called as he crashed to the boards.

"What about it?" said the Colonel to the Naval Officer.

"The youngster is wonderful," admitted the Naval Officer. "Wonderful! But if Mummery once *hits* him!"

"Yes, I think he ought to hit him once," observed the Colonel.

"Keep that up, young Bob," murmured Mr. Pounder, as Otho's seconds worked to cool, massage and restore him, "and you're the Heavy-Weight Champion of England this night—if you got the sense not to let 'im knock you out. . . . I'll slip around an' up topside, to see if the missis wants to say anythink to you."

Apparently Mrs. Pounder only wanted to say that Otho was leading handsomely on points, and was a silly young fule to try to knock Joe Mummery out—a thing that could not be done by boy, man or de'il. . . . Otho was to maintain swift elusive tactics, strike and go, and occasionally to get in a bit of sudden and effective aggression. . . .

"Quite so," agreed Otho, and smiled to himself. All very good and very sound advice, but he thought it quite possible that he had a better fighting brain and was a better strategian and tactician than Pug Pounder or even his lady wife.

§ 5

"Time!"

And again Otho was facing Joe's expressionless face, himself smiling and confident. . . . Joe had hit him really hard about three times. . . . He had certainly hit Joe really hard about thirty times, and Joe wasn't looking any the better for it.

Joe rushed aggressively, Otho cross-countered most effectively, followed up with a smashing right, and sprang away; Joe followed and drove a tremendous left, as Otho sidestepped and brought a very heavy right over to Joe's jaw, and then sprang through Joe's guard and again began piston and steam-hammer work on Joe's ribs and mark—left, right, left, right, each blow telling heavily, until Joe was able to get behind his arms once more and to shoot up a vicious upper-cut which missed its mark as Otho sprang back, lashing out a strong straight left as he did so.

"Time" found him full of energy and aggression, and easily the winner of the fourth round.

Throughout the great concourse of spectators, the opinion prevailed that the old 'un had certainly got to bring off a knock-out or lose the fight, and that the young 'un would certainly be knocked out unless he were very careful. . . . Also that it was a splendid fight, one of the old sort, and well worth what it cost to see it.

In the fifth round Otho began to show signs of weariness. He was less aggressive, he moved more slowly, his look of high confidence was gone.

He only just escaped being cornered once or twice, and he dodged Joe's rushes with difficulty. His knees began to give way, and his hands appeared to be too heavy for him to be able to keep them up. Frequently they dropped to his side when Joe was not actually attacking. Many felt sorry for him, and the Naval Officer said it was not so much a case of Rising Youth fighting Declining Age as Rash Inexperience fighting Ripe Experience.

His friend replied that that might be true enough, but that it was also a case of a wonderful boxer and fighter against an ordinary boxer who was a wonderful fighter, and he expected the former combination to win. . . .

Mr. Pounder almost tearfully begged Otho to keep his great 'eart up.

"Did you say great Art or great heart?" asked the smiling Otho.

§ 6

In the sixth round, Otho's condition seemed piteous. He leant on Joe in a clinch, he staggered, he drooped and wilted, his feeble arms could scarcely raise his poor fists, and only side movements of his head and just-in-time dodges and ducks staved off the moment of hopeless and utter defeat. . . . Joe had only to plant his blow and the fight was over.

And Joe seemed to know it, for he moved with a speed rare in Heavy-Weights, and rained tremendous blows upon his shrinking opponent, or, to be exact, *almost* upon his shrinking opponent—for, somehow, that apparently weary and beaten man seemed always to contrive an evasion or a feeble but sufficient guard. . . . Until Joe cornered him fairly and, as the presumptuous youth bent over, raised his mighty right arm to drive down the smashing semi-final blow that would need only to be followed by the hook or the upper-cut, which would end the fight and leave the championship unchallenged for many a day.

Ten thousand eyes stared entranced at the sideways-bending Otho crouched by the post, and the great figure of Joe Mummery above him, his right fist drawn back to the shoulder—and they saw Otho's right hand shoot straight from his hip to Joe Mummery's chin as though it were an irresistible missile, and as the hand shot up in this shattering

blow the whole body, turning on its axis, came behind the fist, and with a leaping upward-propulsion of the legs.

Fair and true on the chin, the hardest blow that Otho had ever struck in his life, smote Joe Mummery where it had the greatest leverage for jerking the head back. It seemed a wonder that this fearful upward blow did not displace the head from its resting-place on the top vertebra. . . . There was a hiss of in-taken breath throughout the huge concourse of deeply thrilled onlookers as Joe toppled over backwards and, like a great oak-tree at whose base the fatal axe-stroke has fallen, crashed down—and lay motionless.

Otho walked to his corner and thence watched Joe, as the loud monotonous count proceeded.

At *"Five,"* Joe stirred. His arms and legs moved spasmodically, and rubbed the resin-covered canvas that hid the boards. . . .

At *"Six,"* he raised his head, and tried to get on to his elbow. . . .

At *"Seven,"* he was on his knees and hands. . . . At *"Eight,"* he was touching the floor with only hand, knee and foot. . . . At *"Nine,"* he rose to his feet, swaying, staring at nothing, a beaten man. His will had driven his brain to bring his body to its feet and to keep it erect, but his brain was not otherwise functioning. . . .

"Knock him out," roared hundreds of voices.

All Otho had to do was to cross the ring, measure his distance, and give Joe a drive on the point of the jaw that would put him down and out for a far longer count than ten.

"Go and kill 'im, Bob! Quick!" hissed Mr. Pounder, as loudly as he dared. . . .

Otho crossed the ring, and a look of faint comprehension flickered in the eyes of the tottering pugilist. . . . He contrived to raise his hands.

"Stick it, Joe," whispered Otho. "Breathe deep and stick it, old chap. . . . Only a few seconds to *'Time.'* . . ."

Joe stuck it. He staggered at Otho, somehow threw his left hand at Otho's face, and then fell heavily against him. Otho clinched tightly and supported Joe's enormous weight. . . .

Joe feebly drummed against Otho's sides. . . .

"You . . . damned . . . young . . . son . . . of . . . a . . .

bald . . . sea-cook," he groaned, as Otho held him up, "I'll . . . give . . . you . . . a . . . punch . . . on . . . top . . . o' . . . the . . . nose. . . ."

"Go it then, Joe," encouraged Otho.

"Break away," roared the Referee, and Otho clung the tighter to the bemused and tottering Joe.

"Break away, there," again shouted the Referee, and Joe made a brave effort to do so, but was unable to leave the supporting arms of his opponent.

The Referee stepped into the ring and approached the close-locked boxers.

"Break away, I say," he shouted, and then strove to part the combatants, as a child might strive to separate two Japanese wrestlers locked into one vast Figure.

Somebody in the audience laughed, and a rude distant man called to the boxers to co-operate and smack the Referee in the eye.

Not wishing to defy authority unduly, Otho slowly relinquished his hold upon Joe, propped him up, and slipped away in the manner of one expecting to receive a terrific blow, as he did so.

Joe stood swaying, and then swayed in Otho's direction, his left hand raised, his right dangling.

He led with his left, and then, swinging his right hand as though it held an Indian club he missed Otho's head, overbalanced and fell to the boards.

As he rose slowly and heavily, and stood at Otho's mercy, *"Time,"* was called.

Mr. Pounder climbed into the ring as Otho lay enjoying the ministrations of his seconds.

"Is this a blarsted frame-up?" he spluttered, almost purple in the face. "Are you double-crossing? . . . If you've sold this fight to Joe Mummery, let me tell you that I . . ."

"Let me tell you that I'll knock you out of this ring, if you don't jump out," said Otho, closing his eyes.

Poor old Joe! . . . It must be hard to feel your Championship slipping from your failing grasp. . . . It must be hard to have to realise that you are getting old and that you have had your day. . . . Still—Joe had said unforgivable things and had never withdrawn them. Since he would not withdraw them, they must be handed back to him—in a boxing-

glove. . . . Nevertheless, he would not go and pole-axe a brave man who stood defenceless but defiant. He'd beat him on points or he'd knock him out when he was fighting-fit, not when he was semi-conscious from a clumsy and unskilful blow that should have made him wholly unconscious for at least ten seconds.

"Time!"

§ 7

Joe appeared to be himself again. The rest, the cold douching, the massage, the towelling, had, as usual, worked wonders. . . .

Joe was quite aggressive, and a very clever feint that deceived Otho completely, brought a smashing right between his eyes and made him see stars, and feel the boards with the back of his head. . . .

He sprang to his feet, and, as Joe charged, dropped almost to his knees, drove a tremendous right to Joe's mark, rose, and hooked him heavily on the jaw. . . . Joe seemed slightly distressed again, and, as Otho sprang after him and, with his terrible straight left, caught him a smashing blow on the chin, he again went down heavily.

He was up as the count *"Three"* was called, and, rushing at Otho, cornered him for a mix-up. Otho covered himself, guarded, upper-cut and slipped sideways. For a second he had Joe's head absolutely in profile, and he drove a battering-ram stroke at his jaw. Joe spun round, and, again from the hip, Otho's right hand shot forward and upward, Otho's body conforming to the movement, getting straight behind the blow, and then putting an extra momentum, force and violence into it, as the legs straightened like mighty springs.

Joe's spin was arrested as this awful blow fell true and fair, squarely on the side of his chin. He crashed to the boards and lay still and senseless as though in death—even through the roar that shook the building, as the crowd leapt to its feet at the end of the loud monotonous count, when it heard the loud triumphant cry of *"OUT!"*

The long cheering that proclaimed Otho the Heavy-Weight Champion of England, in succession to Joe Mummery, knocked out in the seventh round of as fine a fight as any living man had ever seen, was mercifully unheard by the vanquished.

CHAPTER II

THAT night two weary men did each the same brave deed—caught the last train to Tonbury, although aching in every nerve and longing for but one thing, to lie down and to relax all hold on the world of reality.

They sat side by side in a comfortless, bare third-class carriage, and were jolted gently along by a train that seemed to love a quiet night-ramble.

. . . "Reckon she'll live till mornin', Bob?" asked Joseph Mummery. "I'm going to hang myself if she dies. . . . Mary Hawkins. . . . Lady Mangle-Blame. . . . The only gel I ever loved. . . . No others. . . . Not to say loved, I mean. . . . Not one of 'em. . . . Bob—you're educated—what's wrong, an' how long'll she live? . . ." and Joe blew his nose violently into his red bandana.

"How should I know, Joe?" answered Otho. "I tell you my telegram was in the same words as yours, *'Come home at once mother dangerous asking for you all time doctor says come too george.'* . . . She must have met with an accident —or had a stroke, or broken a blood-vessel. . . . P'raps it's a joke."

"Won't be any ruddy joke for the joker," stated Joe with sinister menace in his voice.

Otho lay as comfortably as possible in his hard corner, and, but for this sudden call to his mother's side, would have been fairly happy. . . . Joe utterly changed—his loving and admiring friend again, and ten times more so than he had ever been.

Dear old Joe! He seemed far more delighted at his defeat by Otho than Otho was at his victory over Joe.

Champion of England!

He fell asleep—too utterly weary even to continue his alarmed wonder at his mother's illness or accident—only to be awakened by Joe's awkwardly taking his hand once

again, while he swore shamefacedly that Bob was the very noblest thing in human form . . . that there was not another living being who could have swallowed those lying insults in silence, and straightway gone into training to defeat the fool and ruffian who uttered them. . . . And done it too. . . . Done it in seven rounds. . . . And done it to the acknowledged best Heavy-Weight Champion of England ever known in the memory of man. . . .

"Fair heel-an'-toe fightin' too," said Joe for the tenth time, "and fair beaten on points before being knocked into a half-hour's slumber, an' a doctor there an' all!"

"Rubbish, Joe!" replied Otho, as Joe continued to wring his hand and gaze upon him with a look of dog-like love and admiration. "You made me what I am. . . . And I'm younger and quicker. . . . Next time you'll have me down for the count in the first minute of the first round."

"Not me, Bob," was the solemn reply, "I never touch a glove again, nor step into a ring. . . . I can swear that to your mother to-night on the Bible. . . . Take my blind Bible Oath on it, I can, and God cut my crimson throat if I tell a lie."

"That'll please the poor old dear," smiled Otho.

"Not *'old,'* Bob," rebuked Joe. "Why she's only a little older'n me—an' me young enough to defend a Championship title this night. . . . She isn't by any manner o' means 'old,' Bob."

"No—I meant it as a word of love and affection, Joe. . . . I don't suppose she is forty yet. . . . And I hope she won't feel old, forty years hence, God bless her."

"That's it, Bob! Not forty years old yet, and not old, forty years hence. . . . What's this blasted place? Not Rochester? . . . Lord! What a lot o' things Chatham brings back to your mind! . . . No, not forty yet—an' that brings me to the sort of point where I might say something to you, Bob, that I wanted to say for years. . . . I want to marry her, Bob . . . if you could bear the humiliation-like, of havin' me for a father-in-law . . . an' you a gentleman-born an' might have gone on the Quarter-deck . . ."

"Joe!" interrupted Otho.

"No! Listen a minute, mate—and then say if you must, for if you forbid it, I s'pose I'd better sheer off again. It was like this, Bob.

"Me an' Mary, your mother, with all respect, were true lovers we were, an' we'd fixed the day and all . . . an' a little while before it, we quarrelled. . . . My fault. . . . She said boxin' was low and Godless, an' only gypsies and pot-house roughs and criminals and such, did it. . . . Near broke me heart, and me just boxed a pro, for twenty pound a side and won it and bought her a watch. . . . I ups and defends boxin' and she calls me a horrible human tiger, and my bit of oof she calls 'blood-money'! . . . Says I got it by hittin' and kickin' and bitin' one smaller than meself, and I could sling me hook. . . . I wrote to her, Bob, I did. . . . Regularly I wrote. . . . An' when I comes home again—here she is, married to some Dook, and you his son and heir to the title and anything else you could pick up, that he hadn't pawned. . . . An' now we've been parted, to this very night, Bob—for she says she don't marry any Godless Boxing Man, not if it were ever so, and I say I've got to defend me title whether or no. . . . She says I needn't, and I says she didn't understand.

"'*Then you marry some one that does, Joe,*' she says—'*or you can wait till you've defended your blasted title*'—no '*precious title,*' *she says*—'*and lost it. . . . But marry a bruiser, I don't—never have and never will,*' she says."

"She has a will of her own, for all that she's so delightfully woolly-witted over some things," laughed Otho.

"Ah! She's a grand old gel—young gel—I mean," continued Joe, "and I'm askin' you, Bob. . . . Think it over, and don't let it come between us. . . . I've loved her truly for over twenty years, Bob—off and on—and she'd be happy with me, if you were all right about it, boy. . . . I hate shovin' meself on to you as a father-in-law like, Bob—but it won't make any difference in my humble respect—and I won't presoom on it, Bob. . . . Call you '*Sir,*' always, if you say so, mate."

"I'll call you something much worse than that, if you do," was the reply. "As for your marrying my mother, nothing would give me greater pleasure, if she is willing. You'd make a splendid husband for a splendid wife, Joe—and I'd be proud to have you for a step-father. . . . I don't think she is too happy with the Briggses, although her sister is very good to her, and the Old Pirate's so fond of her. . . ."

"And here she may be lyin' on her death-bed—and me

talkin' about marriage," groaned Joe. . . . "But God bless you, Bob, for what you said—whether or no—an' I'm your respectful humble servant, Sir, from the minute you knocked me out till the end of me life—an' there's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Sir."

"You call me 'Sir' again, and I'll do for *you,* Joe," said Otho.

"And so you could, mate! You proved that to-night," said Joe humbly.

§ 2

It indeed appeared to be the death-bed of poor Lady Mandeville-Bellême to which her son tip-toed in the small hours.

She lay still, her white face almost whiter than the bandages that surrounded it. She had been knocked down by a motor-car in the Tonbury High Street, sustaining head injuries, a broken leg and very severe shock, having been dragged along and then pinned under the car.

The doctor had said that her son and the other person for whom she continually asked, had better be sent for, at once.

George had told these things to Otho and Mummery, in the parlour, where Mrs. Briggs wept without restraint; Mr. Briggs moralised, mourned, and sustained himself with extra whisky; Liz wrangled viciously with Bert; and a bright and capable-looking nurse came and went on her affairs.

She lay so still, with closed eyes, that Otho, with sinking heart and constricted throat, wondered if she could have died since the nurse left her. . . . He had not realised, not vaguely dreamed, that he loved his mother as much as this. . . . He felt that he was about to suffocate . . . that his heart was about to stop.

The eyes opened . . . and he tip-toed swiftly to the bed.

"Otho! My darling boy," whispered the waxen lips. "I couldn't die till I'd seen you. . . . And Joe . . . and make it up with him."

"Don't talk any more, darling," implored Otho. "I'm sure you ought not to. . . . You should be sleeping. . . . I am going to bring the nurse."

"Not yet, my darling son. . . . I had what they call a

seddytive. . . . I'll sleep when I've told you . . . and spoken to Joe. . . . Is he come?"

"Yes, Mother darling—but see him in the morning, you'll be better then and . . ."

"There mayn't be any more mornings for me, my son."

"Nonsense, darling! The doctor says it's nothing much, and you'll be about again, in a day or two. . . . What you've got to do now is to sleep."

"Fetch Joe then. . . . I'll sleep when I've spoken of it, p'raps. . . . I can neither rest nor sleep nor die till I have done that."

Otho crept from the room, found the nurse, and learned that the doctor had said that if the sleeping-draught failed and she still called for her son and the other man, she had better be allowed to see them for five minutes, as she evidently had something on her mind.

Did the doctor fear the worst?

No, he never did that, he always hoped for the best, the nurse declared, with professional cheerfulness.

Otho beckoned Joe from the parlour, and they crept to the sick-room. . . . Joe's lips trembled as he gazed at the white lips of the waxen face of the woman whom he had first courted twenty years ago—a red-cheeked buxom country lass, instinct with life and love and brimming vitality.

Was his Mary dead? If so, he would . . .

Again the agonized eyes opened.

"Is that you, Joe?" whispered the stricken woman.

"It's me, Mary," whispered the huge man huskily, and knelt at her side as gently as a child, the tears streaming down his face.

Otho went to the other side of the bed.

"I feel I'm dying," said Lady Mandeville-Bellême, "and I can't go without asking your pardon—both of you. . . . I can't talk long, and I must say it quickly now. . . . Do say you forgive me, Otho, for not being a better Mother to you, and for marrying your father. I didn't ought ever to have been your mother."

"Hush, darling. . . . Don't!" whispered Otho. "Don't!" and pressed his lips to the white forehead of the woman he had always loved with great pity and great understanding.

"And you, Joe," continued the feeble voice, "say you forgive me. . . . I don't know why I ever did it, Joe. . . .

I didn't want a title. . . . And I sent you off with my foolish silliness and wicked anger thinking my heart was broken because you put your low boxing before me."

"Mary," groaned Joe, *"I'll never, never put a glove on my hands again. . . . I swear to God——"* and could say no more. He could only press his face against the bed at Mary's side.

"I sent him away, and I married your father, Otho, in my spiteful anger at Joe, to pay him out and to serve him right. . . . But Joe ought to have been your father really, Otho. . . . For he's the best man I ever knew . . . and the only man I ever loved . . ." and the weak voice broke, and tears rolled down to the pillow.

"Don't, darling," murmured Otho again, controlling his twitching lips.

"And now I am dying, the only thing I want is to feel that you both forgive me, and that you are friends with each other. . . . You two. . . . My two boys. . . . My son and my husband that should have been. . . ."

"Oh, Mary my gel . . ." began Joe, but could say no more. Emotion choked him, and tears ran from between the fingers of the hands in which he bowed his face.

Otho bent over his mother and kissed her lips once more.

"Can you hear what I'm saying, darling?" he asked.

"Every word, my boy," was the reply.

"Then hear me say that you have been the best and finest and most perfect mother a boy ever had," he lied.

"And as for Joe," he added, "Joe and I are one, and we are friends for life. No man ever had a better friend. . . . And the day I am looking forward to is the day when he becomes my step-father."

Across the bed, before the weeping and smiling eyes of his mother, Otho took Mummery's hand.

"Joe," he said, "I am proud to be your friend. . . . Proud and grateful. . . . And I shall be proud to be your step-son. . . . And I only hope I may prove worthy of you, Sir," and he wrung Joe's hand.

Joe could not answer. A beatific smile lit the face of Lady Mandeville-Bellême, and her eyes closed. A tense silence fell.

"She's asleep, Joe," whispered Otho, and they crept from the room, both wondering if they were dream-people, and the

nurse a realistic vision as she rose from the chair on which she had been sitting near the door.

With united distaste for the majority of the Briggs family, they declined the feebly-offered suggestion of a "shake down," and left the house, parting to go their several ways at the front door.

"Good night, dear old Joe. . . . Dear old step-father," said Otho, extending his hand, "I'm sure she'll pull through. . . . Splendid constitution. . . . Good night, Sir."

"Good night, Mister. . . . Good night, Bob," stammered Joe. "Say you forgive me, Bob—for evil-thinkin' and evil-speakin' and treatin' you badly, and callin' you damn lies. . . . Say you forgive me, Bob."

"What? For calling me a boxer who wouldn't fight, a coward, a swindler, a fight-seller and a double-crosser, Joe? That's all washed out. . . . I don't blame you for thinking it. . . . But I just thought I'd prove you wrong."

"It's the most wonderfullest day I ever seen, Bob," mumbled Joe. . . . "Beaten for the Championship of England by a boy, and him me own pupil and maybe me own step-son. . . . Bob, I can't say what I feel—not now. . . . See you to-morrer, Bob. I'm going to go and pray all night for my poor Mary. . . . Say you forgive me, Bob, and I reckon God will too—'specially after me bein' beat like this. . . . Beat in seven rounds. Beat to hell and blazes.

"God bless you, Bob."

But the prayers of Joe Mummery were prayed in vain, for Lady Mandeville-Bellême, *née* Hawkins, died that night.

CHAPTER III

LEAVING Joe to his grief, Otho, after his mother's funeral, unable to bear the miserable loneliness of his lodgings, went out into the streets of Tonbury. Well he knew the anodyne of "road-work," the long, steady, mechanical heel-and-toe walking that lulls the mind and tires the body.

Returning from a ten-mile tramp, he bethought him of his promise to visit Mr. Pounder at the earliest opportunity.

That gentleman now babbled of green laurels and contracts new, and of the Heavy-Weight Championship of Europe.

Otho, on the contrary, tasted the flavour of his recent victory as dust and ashes in the mouth, and found that ambition for further championship was dead within him.

Boxing was a sport, the greatest and most glorious of all sports, but it was not a life-business and profession—at any rate for Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême. What was a suitable and attainable profession for that gentleman, remained to be discovered.

Mr. Pounder was not at home; Mrs. Pounder was—and in a state of high dudgeon and indignation.

"I'm glad ye've come, laddie, for it's saved me the trouble o' sending for ye," she said, leading the way to the kitchen. "It canna' go on . . . and I hae done ma best. . . . She's bad through and through . . . a thief and a harlot that's neither to haud nor to bind . . . and she is in trouble this time wi'oot doot or denial . . . and the gold watch that ma feyther gae'd ma mither on their wedding-day. . . . Money wouldna ha' bought it fra me . . . the lyin' ungrateful deceitful besom . . ." and Mrs. Pounder thumped the ironing-board with violence and significance.

"Where is she? I am so sorry, Mrs. Pounder," said Otho, as emotion caused a brief pause in the spate of the poor lady's torrent of indignant words. . . . "We'll get it back

all right. She'll have pawned it here in Tonbury, no doubt. . . ."

"It's got to end, laddie," interrupted Mrs. Pounder. "I canna thole the dirrty thieving young Jezebel any longer. I'm sorry, but . . ."

"I wouldn't ask you to, Mrs. Pounder. She'll have to go . . . and she can go to the devil, the ungrateful little liar. I've kept my promise and given her her chance. . . ."

"Ye've been a fule," snapped Mrs. Pounder.

"An' I've been anither," she added, both in sorrow and in anger.

"Where is she?" asked Otho again.

"God knows," replied the angry Mrs. Pounder. "She rin straight oot o' the hoose when I accused her."

"Accused her of what?" asked Otho.

"Ma gold watch. Amn't I telling ye?

"'Ye've done it now, ye gutter gaol-bird,' I said. 'I'm no fule of a laddie to be twisted roond yer finger, ye sorning lying thief. . . . Get ye upstairs, an' bring me doon that watch,' I said, 'or ye'll sleep in a prison-cell this nicht. . . . I'll fetch a policeman this meenit,' an' she went straight from the room and oot o' the hoose wi'out a worrd. . . . Where I thocht to hear her go up the stairs, I heard the front door slam and that's all I ken aboot yer Miss Victoria Bate."

Angry, disgusted, and sick at heart, Otho did his best to soothe the bereaved lady, and promised her that not only should she be relieved forthwith of Victoria's society, but that he would leave no stone unturned to recover the stolen watch.

§ 2

That same evening Joe Mummery sat before a dying fire—his head upon his hands. The spirit of the brave and simple-minded Josephus was still abased in the dust and ashes of grief and of self-condemnation, remorse and regret. As was now his nightly custom, he was flagellating his soul. He had insulted, abused, and long misjudged the bravest and noblest soul he had ever known—a man who had quietly taken his vile insults and mockery, had bided his time, and then fought him and beaten him to a stand-still. . . . Had fairly made him eat his words . . . had taken his title from him in fairest of fair fight. . . . And this splendid man—this great

boxer—this great fighter, stern, strong and indomitable as he was honourable, had most fully and freely forgiven him.

And what return was Joe Mummery making for this generosity? He had wanted to thrust himself upon him as a step-father, or was it father-in-law? Joe Mummery, A.B. . . . rough sailor and bruiser that was going to make himself step-father, or was it father-in-law, to Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême, son of the old Dook and rightful heir to that castle place, and the Bellême lands. . . . And the boy had said he hadn't any objection. . . . No, he'd said more than that. . . . He'd sworn he would actually be proud to have old Joe for his step-father. This gentleman—this aristocrat—this educated Oxford College man—this quarter-deck high-class nob—this really great boxer—this fierce fighter—had said he would be proud to be related to Joe Mummery.

To think of it! . . . This man whom he had bitterly and contemptuously abused and who in return, without a word, had shown who was the fighter and who was the miserable mouth-flapper—willing to be his step-son. What could he do for Otho who had done so much for him—in forgiving him, and in warmly welcoming him as his mother's husband. Poor, poor, Mary!

And the more deeply sank the spirit of Joe Mummery in the slough of grief and of remorse, regret and shame, the more loftily soared his soul on the wings of pride and hope. Willing to be his step-son—the undoubted future Heavy-Weight Champion of the World—old Joe Mummery's step-son and son of that splendid old girl who had been his truly loved Mary Hawkins in the days of his wild and wayward boyhood, and whom he had adored—off and on—all his sea service, and whose memory he now fair worshipped, he did. . . . Thank the good God A'mighty she had lived until they reached her bedside.

Young Bob Blame o' Briggses who he'd taught to box as a nipper! . . . Young Sir Otho Robert Mandeville-Bellême who had taught him something in the ring in return! . . . Champion of England! . . . Champion of Europe and—God helpin' him—Champion of the World. . . . And then he could make real big money, and retire and live like the gentleman born that he was—buy back his castle and lands

and be the famous sporting baronet. . . . A regular Lord Queensberry.

Yes, and then what about that Load of Mischief he'd gone and made himself responsible for—that artful deceitful slut that wasn't fit to clean his boots? He couldn't hardly contain himself, when he thought about her. . . . And there again, Mr. Clever Joe Mummery was to blame. If he hadn't got him to Oxford he'd never have fallen into the clutches of the rotten bad lot whom he had stood up for in his foolish gentleman's way of doing the "gentlemanly" thing. . . . And then he'd bin the cause of the boy's leaving Oxford by the way he'd insulted him over the fight that Bob had meant to win mercifully and with a small margin of points. . . . Of course he had, and but for that wooden-headed fool, the referee, he'd have done so. Anybody could see he was letting the other man down lightly—very natural, too, in front of that lovely young lady that he was gone on.

Ah, now, *that* would be the one for Bob to marry! She'd be a real Lady Mandeville-Bellême, and would take her part proper when Bob bought lands and castle back, and was once again in his rightful place among the dukes.

Well, no use cryin' over spilt beer. And no use trying to get young Bob to abandon that Poll he'd brought from Oxford to save her from the trouble she'd brought on herself . . . and now in tow with Ted Baldon! . . . When you screwed up your courage, and dared to speak to him about it, all he would say was, "I said I'd stand by her, and I shall do my best. *'I Saye and I Doe.'*"

Lot of damn nonsense! . . . Wring her neck, more like! Young Bob didn't know half nor quarter of what went on, and it wasn't good telling him either. . . . And she had made his name mud with all his friends and relations. Stand by her? . . . Wring her neck, more sense!

Wring her neck? . . . Why—yes—that was sense all right. . . . Anybody that did that would be doing something for young Bob—setting him free from the Jezebel, from blackmail, from anxieties and worry and nuisance. . . . Set him free to live like a gentleman and be a gentleman, without fear of being disgraced at any moment by this bitch being in the police-court for drunk-and-disorderly, for accosting, or for worse. . . . His name mentioned by her, in court, as her "friend" and protector—and put in the *Tonbury Argus*.

Yes. That disgrace to her sex, and mill-stone about young Bob, had lived too long. . . .

Joe Mummery sat staring into the heart of the almost dead fire—his usually rather terrible face terrible indeed. . . . Its stone became granite; its steel eyes, agate; its firm hard mouth a lipless gash.

Anon he pulled a huge silver watch from his pocket and consulted it absent-mindedly.

Without noticing the time, he returned it to his pocket, and stood staring at the floor, his powerful face a study of relentless determination.

It would have made a perfect model for a sculptor working on a figure to be called The Avenger.

Joe Mummery, his hands clenching and unclenching, stared unseeing at the floor. . . .

"I've done-in all the other Ten Commandments, I s'pose . . ." he murmured at length.

Joe stared long at the door. He put his hands together and looked up toward the ceiling.

"O Lord," he said, "I have done-in nine o' the Ten. . . . No, I'd better kneel down to it. . . . Caps off. . . ."

He knelt beside the sofa and continued, his face in his hands:

"O Lord, I've been a wicked sinner and broke nine of Your Commandments and am a shame and disgrace to You and the Navy and my King and Country. And You have forgiven me, O Lord, and prospered me because You said 'Old Joe Mummery doesn't mean any harm to anybody.' 'And now, O Lord, I am tempted over the Tenth Commandment—to do-in a young woman. But it would be to save young Bob, O Lord, who was to be my step-son—but there, You know all about it, Lord. . . . But as You have forgiven me, I know, about all the other Commandments, I want You to forgive me for this one if ever I broke it, O Lord. . . . Be merciful and helpful to young Bob in his trouble. He loves a real lady and he's got in with an awful You-know-what, bein' young and foolish and terrible headstrong and stubborn and proud.

"If I am tempted by the sight of her, one night, I may wring her neck. Keep her out of my way, O Lord, and I shall know it for a sign that such would be wrong and lead to no good.

"Thank you, Sir, and may I be excused, and God have mercy on my sinful soul, Amen. . . ."

Joe Mummery rose to his feet and rang the bell for his "second," as he termed Mr. Bossom, that faithful factotum who performed the functions of butler, valet, cook, gardener, secretary, general adviser, and keeper of his master's keys and conscience.

"Yessir? What's up *now,* Joe?" inquired Mr. Bossom, after knocking and entering.

"Look here, fat-head," replied his master. "Suppose you had a beloved friend or a brother or a father or a son who had a You-know-what hanging on to him like a blasted barnacle, and was always being driven mad by her, and also disgraced by her, what would you do?"

"Nothink," replied Mr. Bossom, "'cept mind me own business an' be thankful that she wasn't mine."

"Ho! You'd do nothing to help your friend or brother or father or son," inquired Joe sarcastically.

"Not me," affirmed Mr. Bossom. "Not unless it was you, o' course, Joe—but you ain't been and married nor otherwise contracted-out with no such female, have yer, Joe?"

"No, Mr. Fat-Headed Bossom, I've not. . . . But s'pose I had—how far would you go to help me and save me?"

"As far as to where she was," replied Mr. Bossom promptly.

"And then?" asked Joe.

"Twist 'er neck, Joe."

"And be hung?"

"Not if I couldn't 'elp it, I would. Not 'alf, I wouldn't, Joe."

"There is such a woman, Bill."

"Aw-right, Joe. Lemme finish me supper an' then you give me 'er address. . . . I lef' some beer in the jug. . . ."

"Garn, you old fool," said Joe. "I'd sooner trust a delicate job, like scraggin' a female, to a Red Marine than to you. . . . But in case I ever should meet her, and anything happens, all you've got to do is to say I never left this house between Retreat and Revelly, see?"

"Well, no more you 'ave, Joe. . . . You goin' to scrag 'er? . . . Lemme do it, Joe—you don't know yer own strength, an' you'd 'ate to be 'ung with thousands o' pounds not spent, and an 'ouse like this to live in—an' me for your servant."

"Shut your tripe-trap and take your mouldy sea-boot of a face below. . . . An' tell your missis that if she hears me go out or come in, any night, you'll deafen her for life, Able-Seaman W. Bossom."

The Able-Seaman saluted and withdrew, observing that he was Able enough 'tween-decks, and if his wife didn't agree to become as deaf as he deemed advisable, he'd get 'er sumpthink from the chemist.

A little later, Joe Mummery, having left the light burning in his front parlour to show that he was at home, went out into the dark damp night. He was wearing a heavy blue suit of thick cloth, a heavy overcoat, thick boots and a bowler hat.

Joe stepped out smartly, and in a few minutes left the brightly lit shop-fronts behind him, and approached the bridge that spanned the river.

As he did so, something or some one, got awkwardly on to the parapet, was dimly visible beneath the lamp that marked the centre of the bridge, and then rolled, jumped or fell. There was the sound of a heavy splash. Sack? Dog? Cat in a basket? Too heavy. A drunk? A suicide?

Even as these thoughts raced through his mind, Joe Mummery raced like a sprinter to the centre of the bridge, and peered over.

Horribly black and cold-looking in the thin moonlight. . . . Swift current. . . . Deep soft black mud at the sides. . . . No sign of anything. . . . Yes!

Joe leapt on to the parapet, gave his bowler hat a sharp tap to settle it, and dived, fully clad, into that cold, black, oily depth, without a thought for his own peril.

He had acted exactly in the spirit in which he had acted at that moment long, long before, when he had seen the despairing face of Bill Bossom borne past him, thirty feet below, in the raging sea. . . . Simply a case of Duty suddenly presented and as suddenly performed . . . quick grasp at the need for action, and action nearly as quick as the thought.

For Joe had seen a hand appear for a second above the black water, and had himself reached the water almost as quickly as the hand fell back into it. . . .

Bitter, bitter cold . . . it made one gasp . . . this thick clothing and boots no help. . . . God keep us both out of

the twenty-foot water-plants and the trailing weeds and reeds that drown strong men as though with subaqueous nets.

Joe came to the surface empty-handed, drew breath, trod water for a second or two, saw a head appear and dragged himself through the deep water with a powerful over-arm stroke.

He thought of the time he had dived for Bill Bossom, and of the many "fully-dressed" swimming-races in which he had taken part in ships' sports. . . . He couldn't do this much longer though, and if the man clung to him and struggled, they'd both be drowned—what with the bitter cold, the strong current, the depth in the middle, and the wicked weed-beds to get through before the all-engulfing black mud was reached.

Joe struggled on, a mighty swimmer in the prime of his strength, but terribly handicapped, and soon his hand seized a coat collar and he turned on his back and held the head above the water.

There was no struggle, and Joe rested, using only his legs, and regained breath as the current carried him and his helpless salvage along.

What to do? . . . No good striking out for the bank and trying to get this party through them cruel reeds and weeds and trailers twenty feet long, only to reach ten foot of the softest mud—if you ever got there.

No—better swim along on his back with this corpse's head on his chest, until he found himself under the railway-bridge —then make a mighty fight for the bank where the canal-barge goods-wharf was, and get ashore there.

The corpse came to life and a hand groped at Joe's face.

He seized it firmly. . . . No grabbing. . . . A woman! A minute later he drew the body higher, got right under it, and with only his lips at the surface of the water, swam lustily on his back.

Could he do it?

Doubtful. . . . Too benumbingly cold. . . . Clothes and boots too heavy and getting heavier. . . . Might do it if he dropped the passenger. . . . Never. . . . If the passenger drowned he'd drown with her. . . . If Joe Mummery picked up the stick, he held on to it like death—even if he had got the muddy end of it. . . . Like death. . . . Yes—and till Death, too. Sinking? . . . All right. . . . Rough luck if

he was now bearing up a dead body and would himself die in the effort to bring a mere corpse ashore. . . . Never mind! Joe Mummery had gone in head first for this, corpse or not, and he'd fetch it ashore or drown.

The bridge between him and the stars. . . . Now fight for your life and the corpse's life too. . . . Mustn't get ashore without it.

And his tremendous strength, courage, and big-hearted determination enabled him at length to get his arm over a barge mooring-rope and to take a long rest.

Thereafter it was almost easy to pull himself and his burden to the very steps of the wharf, to one of which the rope was attached by means of a heavy ring.

In black darkness Joe staggered up the steps, breaking the utter silence of the deserted wharf, dropped his sodden burden upon the ground and forthwith began, in no uncertain or gentle-handed fashion, to apply First-Aid to the Drowned by the methods he had learned in the Navy.

He decanted the water from the corpse's interior, he pressed heavily upon its stomach, he pulled its tongue from the back of its mouth, and he raised and lowered its arms with steady rhythm until at last the corpse began to sigh, sneeze, groan and breathe wheezily.

"Drop of hot grog an' some hot blankets about your mark, mate," he said, and hung for a second in doubt between the police-station and his own bed—but only for a second. Joe did not like police—naval, military nor civil.

"Fancy pullin' anybody out of the river on a cold night an' then pushin' 'em into the hands o' the p'lice," he said. "Hand it over to Bill Bossom's missis," he decided, "an' say it's a hairess I've saved an' is goin' to marry me an' make me a dook."

And with a mighty heave he got the apparently dying derelict across his broad shoulder and was off at a loping jog-trot, within five minutes of stepping on to the wharf.

Under a bright triple-light lamp-post near the goods-yard of the railway station, he set his burden carefully down upon a bank. A young girl! . . . She moved. . . . He pushed her hair off her face as she moaned. . . .

Joe Mummery stepped back, and his face appeared stricken and contorted.

"*Victoria Bate,*" he whispered. . . . "And I've been and saved you. . . . Well—your life's mine then, anywise.

"O Lord," he whispered, "this is a sign.

"I did see her. . . . And You made me save her!

"I've actually been an' saved Bob's curse when she was dyin' all right."

His huge and powerful right hand went to the long bare throat of the limp unconscious girl. . . . It seized the throat but relinquished it at once.

Both hands, as though drawn by invisible but irresistible bonds, went to the thin neck, encircled it . . . were withdrawn . . . went out again toward it, and hovered . . . hovered . . . hovered.

"No," he said. "I'll play fair with the Lord God. He sent me to *save* her!"

With another mighty heave Mummery swung the girl up and on to his broad shoulders.

What to do? What would young Bob have him do? Get her to her home of course. Police mustn't know, anyhow. They'd run anybody in and jug them for committing suicide. Interfering swine!

Turning back into the darkness he made his way to the bank and with a steady jog-trot made for the bridge from which he had dived. With difficulty and many falls he made his way up the slippery grass bank, climbed the fence and reached the road.

Now what? First copper he met would pinch him for running about with a drowned corpse and all, at that time of night. How to get her safe home? Pity old Tom Adams' cab wasn't handy. Fill the poor girl up with hot rum. Hide her in the dark there and run to where old Tom's cab would be standing outside the Station.

A minute or so later a coatless but authoritative man dashed into the deserted bar of the "Ring o' Bells."

"Three o' rum hot, Miss, quick," he said. "Me and my mate got all wet like. . . . Slipped on the wharf steps, savin' a little dorg, brown, with blue eyes . . ." and ere the haughty but interested maiden could expostulate, the man was gone, leaving no deposit on the doubtless valuable glass.

"No good," growled Joe. "I can't get it into her. Nearly choked her, that time. Well, here's next best thing," and

swiftly swallowing the rum, he dropped the glass and dashed off into the direction of the Railway Station. A few minutes later he returned in the cab, and the inanimate Victoria was soon riding in that same dank chariot in which, accompanied by Otho Bellême, she had first approached the portals of Pug Pounder.

§ 3

The front sitting-room in Mr. Pounder's house some two hours later. Otho striding to and fro, astounded and ashamed that some unknown, unadmitted devil of Hope *would* stir in his heart. He had done his absolute utmost, and the best doctor in Tonbury was with Victoria now.

His last words had been "I can hold out no hope whatever," and Otho's had been, "I will give you . . . Oh, I beg your pardon. . . . I know you won't give up while there's a chance," as the doctor bade them cease the futile labours of resuscitation.

The ghastly feeling of utter impotence! Nothing that he could do. . . . But nothing had been left undone. She was in the best of hands, and in his imagination he ground his heel upon the face of that little foul devil of Hope, but felt it squirm and kick with unquenchable vitality. He heard it laugh. . . .

Joe sat motionless as though carved from granite, his head between his hands, his mind a seething turmoil. Suddenly he groaned. "Say I did right, Bob," he said. "Had I oughter let her drown?

"To think it was me brought this curse back on you again, Bob. It's God's punishment on me—that's what it is."

Otho wrung his old friend's hand, without speaking.

"If I'd known it was her, Bob, I'd never have gone in after 'er."

"Yes, you would, Joe."

"No, I wouldn't, Bob."

"Yes, you would."

"No, I wouldn't."

Otho flung himself into a chair beside which lay a copy of the *Tonbury Argus* that Mr. Pounder had thrown down earlier in the evening.

Mechanically he picked it up. . . . Flung it down again.

. . . Part of the front page fell back. . . . He stared uncomprehendingly—half-comprehendingly. . . . The door opened. . . . He heard uncomprehendingly—half-comprehendingly.

What did his ears hear?

"I am sorry. . . . I have done my utmost. . . . No more can be done. . . . *The poor girl is dead. . . .*"

What did his eyes read?

FASHIONABLE WEDDING AT ST. MARY'S

Dr. Maykings' daughter marries Mr. Jules Maligni.

The marriage took place this afternoon, at St. Mary's Church, of Mr. Jules Maligni, son of Señor Pedro Maligni of Tangier, and Margaret, only daughter of Dr. Matthias Maykings, of this town. The bride looked very lovely in . . .

Book II

BELLÊME OF THE LEGION

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

COLONEL ROLLAYES of the Tenth Senegalese was a man with a fixed idea; a man with a mission. The idea was that the Senegalese make the finest soldiers in the world; the mission to spread this belief abroad.

This belief was his religion, and of this religion he was a stout apostle. In season and out of season he preached his belief and manifested his faith. As a good evangelist he combined works with this faith—one of which was his spending his time and his money in the perfection of M'Bongu in his art.

The composite *popotte* mess at Ain Bourdja, at first rather welcomed the appearance of this new star in the somewhat empty sporting firmament, but in course of time, familiarity bred a certain boredom, though never contempt, for in their different spheres of influence and action, Colonel Rollayes and Private M'Bongu were distinguished men. So that when both departed for Paris, the one in attendance upon the other, there was none who positively wept.

On the other hand, there was none who was not thrilled to the depths of his patriotic soul, when the French, the European, and indeed the World's Press, was filled with the name of M'Bongu.

From the day when he was first gazetted to a Senegalese battalion, Aristide Rollayes had become a fanatical pro-Senegalese enthusiast, and a bigoted believer in the theory that one of France's greatest problems could be solved by means of the increasing military exploitation of these splendid people. Why should France be taxed to extinction financially, and groan beneath the crushing burden of the maintenance of vast armies of Frenchmen? Why should she compete in the murderous European armament race? Why should she be a nation of conscripts? Indeed, why

should she live in ever-present fear of her infinitely more powerful and most hated rival, when here to her hand was an inexhaustible reservoir of man-power—and such man-power; the finest fighting material in the world?

The Senegalese! Look at them. Giants in stature and in strength; brave as lions, fierce as tigers, gentle as lambs, strong as gorillas, and docile as children; faithful as dogs, steady as elephants, intelligent as—well, as intelligent as is necessary.

Absolutely created for soldiering, born soldiers, drill was their hobby, marching and manœuvring their pastime, fighting their joy and their delight.

Once in the saddle of his hobby, Colonel Rollayes rode fast and far. Naturally, mischievous and malicious people, such especially as Colonels of other kinds of Native Regiments, would occasionally endeavour to unseat him.

"Pooh," they would say. "Senegalese! Your *gobis!* Beastly black cannibals. All very fine for shooting-up a nigger village, perhaps, especially with rifle and bayonet against spear. Useful enough in the jungle, and great lads of their native heath, no doubt. But what about the desert? What about Europe? Would they face European troops? And in particular, would they face a European winter? What sort of a show would they put up against a Touareg rush at dawn? Or in guerilla warfare against the Druses, *par exemple?*"

France might look a bit silly if she followed the advice of Colonel Rollayes and put her whole faith and trust and safety into the hands of a vast black mercenary army, and then in the crucial hour of her terrible need, found that it would not face a white one.

But Colonel Rollayes was absolutely certain that the Senegalese would face (and conquer) anything or anybody. He would go to the stake for his faith. And as a demonstration and a test of it, he took M'Bongu to Paris that he might there face (and conquer) a white man—the foremost exemplar of white courage, strength, endurance, skill, science, and noble hardihood. M'Bongu, the Senegalese should fight and beat at his own game, the Heavy-weight Champion of Europe.

For M'Bongu was a boxer, and, in the opinion of the cognescenti of the Nineteenth Army Corps, no mean judges,

an absolute marvel, and entirely capable of becoming Heavy-Weight Champion of the World, by reason chiefly of his appalling strength and absolute utter indestructibility.

And M'Bongu could box as well as fight, having taken to this great science and art like a duck takes to water, a cat to cream, or a monkey to climbing. The man who stood in a ring with M'Bongu, stood in peril, for he faced a combination of tiger and gorilla, of buffalo and bear.

The idea had been one of Colonel Rollayes' brightest and best, the idea of a lifetime.

What an advertisement for his beloved Senegalese, if M'Bongu beat the Champion! What a vindication of his faith that the Senegalese would face the European! What notable, public, and powerful support of his advocacy of a vast all-black army that should economise the gold, the time and labour, the blood and suffering of France immeasurably!

§ 2

And in the fullness of time, Colonel Rollayes returned from leave, the happiest man in the French army, triumphant, vindicated, justified of his faith, bringing with him his sheaves, in the shape of M'Bongu, wearing the victor's crown of laurels, garlanded with roses, wreathed in smiles, and redolent of triumph and patchouli, the brief idol of the fickle populace.

For in a very terrible combat, M'Bongu had out-boxed and out-fought the Champion of Europe in as fine a style as the enthusiasts of the Fancy in Paris had ever seen. Not only had he given a marvellous display of science, swiftness, strength and endurance, but had astonished the experts by his ring-craft, which was that of a veteran in spite of the fact that he was little more than a novice in formal glove-encounters.

Nor was it a case of a lucky blow and the fortune of war, with every likelihood that a return match might reverse the rôles of victor and vanquished. To the least experienced eye, the champion had been a beaten man from the fourth round, and had most bravely fought a consistently losing fight until superior boxing, fighting and ring-craft had triumphed, and he had lain senseless at the victor's feet. It was, perhaps, natural and excusable that the seconds, backers

and more immediate supporters of the Champion should have taken exception to one aspect of the winner's ring-craft, with its persistent policy of taunting, insulting, goading and enraging the opponent.

The obvious reply to their objections was that the Champion had no need to be enraged if the nigger liked to waste his breath in insulting and goading him in an obvious attempt to disturb, enrage and "rattle" him. Let him waste it, by all means. More fool he to waste valuable breath, and still more fool the Champion to take any notice, much more to be in any way bothered by it. But bothered he had been, and hot too, and distinctly seen to flush at some of the remarks uttered in bad but fluent French, to scowl and to frown, and, moreover, distinctly heard to reply to him. If M'Bongu had obviously tried to "get" him, and had undoubtedly got him, who should blame him?

Well, the Champion's backers, who, unlike Colonel Rollayes, were not rabid Senegalese enthusiasts, blamed him. But that did not affect the result—and M'Bongu had returned to Mellerat as Heavy-Weight Champion of Europe, of the French Army, of the Nineteenth African Army Corps, and of the Senegalese battalions. He also returned thoroughly spoilt, and with a lowered opinion of white men in general and Frenchmen (and women) in particular.

CHAPTER II

GUEST night at the Officers' Mess of the First Battalion of the First Regiment of the French Foreign Legion, at the vast concentration camp at Mellerat; the guest of honour, Colonel Aristide Rollayes of the Tenth Senegalese, just back from a long leave spent in Paris.

Although Active Service was possible, a great campaign perhaps about to open, and orders for its initiation fervently anticipated not War but Sport was the subject that monopolised the conversation this night, *le boxe*, that Sport that had comparatively recently become the fashion in France, and had marvellously captured the gallant Gallic imagination.

It was the eve of the great Boxing Tournament of the Nineteenth Army Corps, and every regiment had sent its gladiators, of all weights save that of the heaviest.

"I suppose there'll be no Heavy-Weight event at all, then?" smiled Colonel Delisle-Tournaye of the Spahis, a lean, saturnine handsome man, tall, graceful and elegant, beneath whose clipped black moustache, small even teeth shone very white. Apparently a languid dandy, but with a hand of iron and a wrist of steel; champion swordsman of the Nineteenth Army Corps.

Colonel Rollayes twirled his moustaches, and his answering smile was something complacent.

"Oh, I hope so, I hope so," he replied. "Surely the Army can find *one* man to spar with him."

"Spar with him!" grunted Colonel Brudenel of the Turcos, a fat and jolly man whose jollity was apt to be a little deceptive, his mouth being completely hidden by a huge moustache and spade beard trimmed like a yew hedge.

"Spar with him, *mon Dieu!* . . . Be assassinated by him. . . . Personally I'd sooner be kicked in the face by my own charger, than 'spar' with your gorilla. . . . No—there will certainly be no Heavy-Weight event."

"Why not rule him out, altogether, as a professional?" suggested Major Brieux of the Tirailleurs, a grizzled thick-

set self-made soldier who had won to his position by sheer merit and conspicuous courage, a heavy man, heavy of face and voice and manner, slow-seeming until the moment for swift action, when none was swifter.

"Because he's not a professional," said Colonel Rollayes sharply, with a cold stare. "Not in the sense, at any rate, that he boxes for his living. I took him to France as my orderly, a private soldier of my battalion; and he has returned here still a private soldier of my battalion, and therefore eligible to compete in the Tournament. Of course he is. The fact that I got him first-class matches with Champions, while on leave, and that he reached the top of the tree, doesn't alter the fact that he's a fighting soldier of this Division, does it?"

"H'm," smiled Major Brieux doubtfully. "Well, Sir, with all due respect . . ." he rumbled through his beard, ". . . but anyhow it doesn't affect the Tirailleurs. We're out for the Feather-Weight event. . . . Still, it might be argued . . ."

"Not by a person with any sense of sportsmanship, I think," interrupted Colonel Rollayes, and turning to *Chef de Bataillon* Bernier, of the Legion, who sat opposite to him, continued:

"And what about the Legion! How do we know that every single man they enter is not an ex-pugilist, a real professional, who has earned his living with the gloves and attained high position in the boxing world? . . . They say that there is absolutely not a single trade, profession, occupation or vocation in the wide world that's not well represented in the Legion; and I'll stake my life on it that there are plenty of professional bruisers! Genuine professionals in the sense that my man never was and never will be . . . men who have done nothing but box all their lives and were never anything but professional boxers. Are we going to ask for their non-existent *dossiers,* or make them swear on the Bible that they are blameless amateurs, if not novices? Absurd. . . ." And the Colonel drained his wine-glass.

"I quite agree with Colonel Rollayes," whispered Commandant Bernier, a man so quiet, so gentle, so mild and self-effacing, that one looked again at his unique row of medals and decorations for valour.

Small, neat, dapper, this leathern-faced soldier, perfect horseman, perfect swordsman, perfect gentleman, was the hero, pride and boast of the brave, desperate and death-desiring men whom he led to inevitable victory.

"I agree entirely," he continued, and conversation ceased that men might the better hear the words of Commandant Bernier. "But possibly I am a little biased. As it happens, we are entering a man for the Heavy-Weight event, and I make no secret of the fact that he was undoubtedly a professional boxer and one of very considerable eminence. He admits to being a national Heavy-Weight Champion, in fact. . . . You all remember 'Black Diamond' of course?"

Never did so quiet a bombshell have so great effect.

"What!" cried Colonel Rollayes, while some stared in silent astonishment and others murmured, *"Mon Dieu,"* or exchanged sly winks and grins.

This was splendid. Trust Bernier to put a spoke in anybody's wheel, especially if the wheel happened to be revolving with undue rapidity.

"Yes," he murmured. "I was in some doubt and slightly uncomfortable in my mind, in view of this man's admitted professional status, though I inclined to the opinion that as he is undeniably a soldier of this Division, he was entitled to box in the Tournament. Still, I am very glad indeed to find that Colonel Rollayes, the—er—owner of the 'favourite,' has laid it down, once and for all, that the point of professionalism does not arise. . . . Excellent! . . . Thank you, Colonel," and Bernier bowed with a pleasant, if not pleasing, smile.

Colonel Rollayes returned the bow without a smile, pleasant or otherwise.

"What's this fellow's name?" he asked. "'Black Diamond' did you say?"

"He calls himself John Brownsbody," was the reply.

"An Englishman!" sneered the Colonel. "Is he, a white man, going to have the temerity to stand up to a negro, six feet six inches tall, nearly as broad, and weighing over sixteen stone? . . . What weight is your negro-fighting Englishman?"

"He's not an Englishman," replied Bernier. "He's another negro."

With two exceptions, the Mess laughed loudly, and an irrepressible lieutenant of Zouaves was moved, in his glee, to bound up and down on his chair.

"A negro!" cried Colonel Rollayes. "A professional pugilist!" His chagrin was evident in his voice.

"Yes," agreed the soft-voiced Bernier, "from Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica or America. I don't know which. . . . And I don't think he does. He's more than half mad, and a very terrible fighter. He was formerly known as 'The Black Diamond,' and my men call him 'The Tiger.' A regular man-eater, too. He disappeared from New York, quite suddenly, at the height of his popularity and fame."

Colonel Rollayes seemed peeved.

"You recruit negroes?" he observed.

"Anybody," smiled Bernier. "Absolutely anybody. No color line—nor any other line."

"And make most magnificent soldiers of them all," bowed Delisle-Tournaye with his flashing smile.

"And you own that he is admittedly an undeniable professional, in a sense that my man is not," mused Colonel Rollayes.

"Yes, I do, unofficially and in our private conversation here," replied Bernier. "But John Brownsbody would stoutly deny that he was The Black Diamond, and take any oath you like that he is an amateur, if asked officially. . . . And what a man was before he joined the Legion is never cast up against him. . . .

"Oh, we can win the Heavy-Weight event, all right," he continued, with a light and merry laugh, "and that is why I am so glad that Colonel Rollayes agrees with me on the subject of professionalism. . . ."

"Well. . . . We shall see. . . . He laughs best who laughs last," shrugged Rollayes, and it was perhaps unfortunate that he laughed quite loudly, while the face of *le Commandant* Bernier was a mask of gravity.

§ 2

Le légionnaire, John Brownsbody, full-blooded negro, was a man with a lot of character, chiefly bad. From the day when he fought his first bare-knuckled battle, a ragged wharf-side boy at Galveston, to the day when he fought his

last razor-skirmish, a be-diamonded gangster in Harlem, New York, he had, he said, always been a fighter; and that but for the fact that his razor unfortunately encountered the jugular vein of his enemy, the notorious murderer Left-hand Pete, in the aforesaid skirmish, he would certainly have risen to the highest eminence.

A jovial, light-hearted murderous child, he was a bad enemy and a worse friend, and in the Legion found himself unpopular. Something of a bully, and much of a brute, he was boastful and quarrelsome in his cups, needed careful handling, and was shunned and avoided by all decent men.

But his stock rose mightily when the great Boxing Tournament was announced and the news was spread abroad that *ce bon* Jean Brownsbody—in real life the famous champion, the missing "Black Diamond"—was to uphold the honour of the Legion by quashing the arrogant and unwarranted claim of the Tenth Senegalese that the Heavy-Weight event would be an absolute walk-over for them, inasmuch as there could be nobody who would have the temerity to offer any obstruction to their champion's promenade.

Cet animal M'Bongu might perhaps have had a bit of undeserved luck in Paris and beaten the European Champion on one of his off-days, but what did that prove, asked the Legion? *Bon Dieu,* the Legion had a man who as "Black Diamond" would have been Heavy-Weight Champion of the World, if he hadn't had the misfortune to come up against his country's police and to find that from hearth and home he had to roam, swiftly, secretly and alone.

Le légionnaire Jean Brownsbody, from being somewhat shunned and avoided, became something of a popular hero, and a person in whose prowess and record the deepest interest was taken.

The recent arrival of this Black Diamond in the Legion was of course, a signal instance of the great truths that Fortune favours the Brave, Heaven helps those who help themselves, and that Virtue always triumphs, said the Legion. At the very moment that the Senegalese had put up this beastly gorilla of the West African jungles, Fate had sent this great champion to save the honour of the Legion!

The only pity was that the Black Diamond was not a white one.

However, even the Legion cannot have everything, and

it was enough that they could produce a man who would quickly prick the bubble reputation of this jumped-up "champion."

The Senegalese pitting themselves against the Legion! . . . Name of a name of a hairless blue monkey!

CHAPTER III

M'BONGU, the Senegalese, was in his element. In his glory he stood, his feet on the solid boards of the ring, his soul on the highest peak of happiness. Not even on the night of his greatest victory in Paris had he been so happy, so thrilled, so glorious, so proud, arrogant, and uplifted.

Audiences, there, had been mere civilians. Here was a vast audience consisting wholly and solely of soldiers; an army, horse, foot and guns—Spahis, Chasseurs d'Afrique, Zouaves, Turcos, Mountain Artillery, Sappers, the Legion, Tirailleurs Algériens, and Senegalese, his own brothers, to whom he was a hero and after this night would be as a god.

And round this open-air ring sat, not fat bald-headed men in black clothing, but officers; the greatest of all Generals, other great Generals, Colonels, *Chefs de Bataillon,* Majors, Captains, Lieutenants; noble representatives of the great French Army.

And noblest of all, his own Colonel.

Beneath the eyes of this vast throng, the great arc lights, and the throbbing stars, stood M'Bongu, clothed in pride. Famous M'Bongu of whom the whole army had, like the rest of the world, been talking for days, and upon whom it now gazed in wonder—his name on every tongue.

"*Mon Dieu,* what a man!" murmured the great General, "if indeed he be human. I don't think I ever saw a man quite so like an ape."

"Well, Sir," replied a General of Brigade, "do you know, I was just thinking I'd never seen an ape so like a man."

"Positively anthropoid," mused the General.

"Positively human," murmured the Brigadier.

"Good job the Legion have found another nigger to fight him," observed Colonel Brudenel to Colonel Delisle-Tournaye. "I shouldn't like to see that creature battering a white man senseless."

"No," agreed the Colonel of Spahis, "but I'd give a year's pay to see a white man batter *him.*"

"Well, 'let the best man win' is the sporting motto," said Colonel Rollayes, almost as uplifted, at the moment, as M'Bongu himself.

And so said the Senegalese soldiers, to a man. Let the best man win, for there he stood in the ring, their idol. Let M'Bongu win.

Much the same said the Tirailleurs Algériens, and the Spahis, with a bias in favour of M'Bongu.

And the Zouaves, the Turcos and the Artillery agreed, but the question of the winner was not one of great moment, since the fight was between two negroes.

But to the Legion the result was all-important, for the untarnished honour of their great Corps was once more at stake. Let the best man win and, O God of Battles, let him be their Black Diamond!

"Don't like the looks o' that bloke. . . . Glad I ain't got to fight him," observed an English *légionnaire,* to his *copain.*

"No, he looks a nasty rough man. . . . Well, set a nigger to fight a nigger," replied the other Englishman.

"Reckon ole Black Diamond's got a chance, mate?" he continued, turning to his other English neighbour.

"No," was the uncompromising reply, "I don't. That's the biggest and finest man I ever saw in a ring. And he's just beat the Heavy-Weight Champion of Europe."

"Well, ole Black Diamond was Champion of America, an' would have bin World's Champion, if 'e hadn't 'ad to do a bunk," said the first speaker.

"Who says so?" inquired the other.

"Why, Black Diamond," was the reply.

"Just so," came the meaning comment. "Anybody ever seen Black Diamond with the gloves on?"

"Well—no. Didn't want to 'urt nobody, I suppose."

"No. . . . And he won't hurt this feller," was the reply.

He did not.

There was a hitch in the proceedings.

A hiatus.

In the hum of the crowd, the note of excited anticipation changed to one of impatience at the delay.

M'Bongu, the Senegalese, still stood in his glory, and stood alone.

The first roars of the stentorian voice of the Staff Sergeant-Major, Master of Ceremonies, announcing the great event of the evening, failed to evoke from the corner he should be occupying, *le légionnaire* Jean Brownsbody, or anything else than earnest requests for a little magnanimous patience; his second bellow, only evasive replies and appeals for time; his third, nothing whatsoever.

"What's this?" growled the great General.

"Looks rather as though the other gentleman has forgotten the appointment," smiled the Brigadier. "Personally, I don't blame him."

Colonel Rollayes leant forward in his seat, caught the eye of Commandant Bernier and permitted himself a hearty laugh.

"Quite so, Colonel," agreed Bernier. "You laugh last. . . .

"But it isn't often one laughs at the Legion," he added.

As the Staff Sergeant-Major, Master of Ceremonies, returning from consultation with the Judges and Referee, strode to the centre of the ring, the roar of the crowd died down until comparative silence fell upon the vast assembly.

"What *can* 'ave 'appened?" asked the English *légionnaire* for the twentieth time.

"I'll tell you exactly what's happened," volunteered his neighbour. "It 'appens that Mister Jean Dogsbody ain't in the ring. That's wot's 'appened."

"Well, I can see that, fat-head, can't I?" snarled the first man, himself a keen boxer.

"Oh! I thought you was arsking," replied his friend.

"What *can* have happened?" ejaculated the man once again. "Reckon them Senegalese have hocussed the pore feller?" he asked, turning from his flippant friend to the other Englishman.

"No, I don't," was the reply.

"No, fat-head; course not," interposed the flippant one. "I reckon he's visiting Topsy and Little Eva while Uncle Tom waits for him up there. Yus, I reckon 'pore ole Joe has gorn to rest,' all right."

But he had not.

Le légionnaire John Brownsbody was running for dear life out into the desert, and from time to time he sobbed as he ran.

"Dear Lawd Jesus, save this nigger, for Yor knows I'se Left-hand Pete and I'se not Black Diamond at all. Such dam' foolishness, dear Lawd! How *could* I be Black Diamond, oh Lawd, when I'se the nigger that done cut Black Diamond's throat?"

§ 2

Raising his hand for silence, the Master of Ceremonies gazed portentously around, a majestic oracle.

"Silence!" he thundered, when all sound had ceased.

"There being no other competitor in the Heavy-Weight Division, I declare Private M'Bongu, of the Tenth Senegalese to be the . . ."

The taciturn man sitting with the other Englishmen sprang to his feet.

"There is another competitor," he cried. "I wish to take the place of . . ."

The rest of the sentence was drowned in deafening cheers, above the roar of which cries of *"Vive la Legion!"* could be distinguished.

The Master of Ceremonies turned to where the man stood.

The excited shouts and cheering died away.

"What's that?" boomed the Sergeant-Major.

"I challenge that negro," shouted the man, and again the cheering burst forth, the cries of *"Vive la Legion!"* now predominant, and, as the man suddenly sat down, only two of his comrades heard him groan.

"Oh God! I forgot! *Mary*. . . . I swore to her when she was dying that I'd never touch a glove again."

Crushed and overwhelmed with shame, he sat bowed down, the face that he covered with his hands sunk almost to his knees.

* * * * *

Both Colonel Rollayes and Commandant Bernier were on their feet, and the former was not laughing.

The Referee beckoned to the two Judges. Their colloquy was of the briefest.

"I suppose I should have to consider any objection, though," concluded the Referee and beckoned to the Sergeant-Major.

"It must be here and now, or not at all," he announced.

Again the Sergeant-Major crossed the ring, and with official eye sought the man who had had the temerity to interrupt his announcement of a walk-over for the Senegalese champion.

"Well, where are you?" he barked. "Stand up there, if you meant what you said . . . and God help you if you didn't," he growled under his breath, even as a man sprang to his feet in the place at which the Sergeant-Major glared.

"I, *le légionnaire* Otho Bellême of the First Company of the First Battalion of the First Regiment of the Foreign Legion, beg permission to enter for the Heavy-Weight event as substitute for *le légionnaire* John Brownsbody, unavoidably absent."

"Get to the changing-tent then, and be quick about it," replied the Sergeant-Major and the roar that followed was heard for miles.

CHAPTER IV

FOLLOWED by his seconds, Joe Mummery, William Bossom and Sailor Harris, Otho made his way from the dressing-tent through a lane of spectators, and climbed into the ring, amidst a deafening roar of applause. Some might yearn for the victory of the black man and others for that of the white, but all rejoiced in the fact that a fight there was to be.

Otho eyed his opponent while his seconds pulled tight new gloves on to his hands.

At close quarters, the negro looked positively colossal. What a chest! What arms! What a column of a neck! And what magnificent legs supported the huge body, on which was evidently not an ounce of superfluous flesh—all solid muscle. And how small the head in comparison with the enormous torso—small and probably almost solid bone. What hope for a knock-out blow when the circumference of the neck is almost equal to that of the head, and the latter scarcely contains a brain to be rendered unconscious? A man could destroy his hands in battering a head like that, and without doing it appreciable harm.

And what of the muscles protecting the "mark"? Magnificent! Those stomach muscles reminded one of the statues of Hercules. Little hope that one could effectively distress the owner of such an armour-plated front by means of blows on the "mark." And what of the face? . . . Sub-human. . . . Savage. . . . Terrible.

At the moment, cold, cruel, deadly, suggestive of a tiger about to be fed, licking its chops in quiet anticipation. . . . And a minute hence? Ferocious, murderous, terrible, suggestive of a tiger leaping with flashing blood-maddened eyes upon its prey.

"Bob, boy, I can't do it. I can't do it," muttered Joe desperately.

"Can't do what, Joe?" smiled Otho.

"Stand by and see you fight this black elephant. Worse'n Jack Johnson. Talk about David and Goliar!"

"Yes, let's talk about them, Joe. David put him down for the count, didn't he?"

"Bob, I can't do it. I can't do it," reiterated Joe. "If he fouls you I shall jump into this ring and . . ."

"I'd never forgive you," said Otho sternly.

"But for me, blasted old fool that I am, you wouldn't be sitting here, boy. . . ."

"Much obliged to you for that, Joe," interrupted Otho.

". . . But I couldn't sit quiet with that fat buck nigger standing there unchallenged in front of a thousand white men and all these niggers and Arabs," continued Joe. "And I'd never fought a nigger. . . . And I thought if I couldn't beat him, I might give him a push or two. And anyhow, he wouldn't have had an unchallenged walk-over. . . . And up I jump before I knew what I was doing—and then I seemed to see Mary's face and I remembered my last words to her. . . ."

"Jolly glad you did, Joe," said Otho.

"And what have I done? Brought this on you. . . . If I'd kep' my silly head shut, this wouldn't have happened. . . . *Me,* brought Mary's son to this! To be broken up by an ondestructible nigger champion!"

Sailor Harris kicked the speaker and caught his eye.

"Talk sense, Joe," he growled. "Landed him 'ere to smash the blasted black-faced nigger, more like. Why, Bob'll out 'im in three rahnds! Remember what 'e done to you, Joe, an' don't talk silly!"

Joe swallowed hard.

"Damme for a fool," he growled. "Of course Bob'll out him. I'd clean forgotten the boy can smack-it-about a bit. . . ."

A sharp word of command ordered the seconds out of the ring.

"God help you, Boy," said Joe as he dropped to the ground, and stood beside Sailor Harris, his mouth a thin hard gash in his granite face.

Otho strode to the middle of the ring, his arms extended to their full length before him. The moment that the tips of his gloves touched those of the Senegalese, he leapt back,

and, on the defensive, awaited what might befall. His highest hope was to put up, for the honour of the Legion, something that could be called a fight, and, to do this, his strategy and tactics must be designed for the postponement of his destruction. Since it was hopeless to fight for victory, he would fight to avoid quick defeat. In short, fight on the defensive. A very sound thing for a boxer to realise his limitations and act accordingly.

This man was some two stone heavier than he, was inches taller, inches longer in the reach, probably twice as strong and half as susceptible to shock. And, in addition to being the perfect fighting animal by nature, he must be the perfect boxer by training, since he had out-boxed that marvellous craftsman, the champion of Europe.

Yes, box for safety and the avoidance of the humiliation of instantaneous and ridiculous defeat. So, let the good M'Bongu declare himself. . . .

Ah! here he came, vast, menacing, confident, appalling.

Those eyes! Eyes of agate. What colour were they? Grey yellowish brown, the irises the colour of gravel seen in sunshine beneath running peat water, set in gleaming, yellowish blood-shot whites. Terrible eyes, the eyes of the tiger. They must be watched unceasingly. No, not the eyes of a tiger. Where had he seen such eyes before? Soulless, shallow, sad, as well as terrible. Yes, in the head of a great ape, as it glared at him from behind strong iron bars. So terribly human, so terribly animal, tragic, haunted. . . .

Suddenly, Otho's head dropped to the right, suddenly flashed back to the left. Two tremendous blows had missed him, and the negro had grunted with his own violence.

Otho smiled with a cool superiority, in no way indicative of his true feelings.

The negro rushed, driving a tremendous right as he did so, and Otho lightly side-stepped and for the fraction of a second put his hands down, and a tremendous cheer rose from the ranks of the Legion.

Sacred name of a little pink dog, he was making the anointed nigger look silly! *Vive la Légion!*

"Oh, careful, Boy! For God's sake, careful," whispered Joe Mummery.

And Otho was careful, and under no delusions. All to the good, if he could anger the man so that he lost his cool-

ness and poise: and all to the good if he could make him tire himself for nothing. But probably, nothing could tire him. It might be possible to puzzle him, though.

Another lightning rush and terrific spring as of the tiger upon its prey. Another easy evasion and a yelp of laughter from the Legion.

This was rather a good start. This marched. But again, no illusions. The Senegalese was, of course, being a bit obvious. What he wanted was a lightning victory, a knock-out in the first ten seconds.

Wait till he settled down really to box. The black giant was edging up to him, his arms flexed at an obtuse angle, elbows and fists at the same level, parallel with the ground, and at the height of his breast.

They were perfectly still. Which would shoot out first? And would it be in earnest, or in feint? No part of that huge ebon statue seemed to move, save that the whole thing grew imperceptibly but steadily nearer.

Otho watched the shallow dreadful eyes, and tried to read the thought that lay behind them. They were dull, empty, lifeless—as of the gorged and sated tiger about to sleep. But the tiger was neither gorged nor sated, and about to do anything but sleep; and Otho, utterly motionless, watched the eyes, while in tense silence, the great statue of black marble moved, as though without moving, upon the smaller one of white.

And suddenly, into those dull, empty, lifeless eyes flashed a gleam, and Otho leapt backward even as the negro struck—and struck nothing.

"Fight, you white rat," he growled, as he squared up to Otho, who had not yet struck a blow. "Show some sport, you village dog. . . . Dis not de runnin' match. . . . I guess you win all dem. Can't run all night here, you know. . . . Stan' still an' I finish you quick. Better get it over, white maggot. . . . Becos when I . . ." and on the word "I," a lightning left shot out and was followed instantaneously with a terrific right hook.

A near thing! Almost had the trick succeeded, and kept Otho waiting for the end of the sentence.

Almost had the Senegalese hypnotised him into feeling that no blow could possibly be delivered until the sentence had been completed. By no means so unintelligent an animal

as he appeared! Did the audience but know it, there should have been a laugh for the Senegalese, for undeniably he had, by a kind of primitive hetero-suggestion, made Otho expect attack at the end of the remark, but by no means during its utterance.

A very near thing indeed.

Had one of those blows come home, it would have come to roost; and had the fellow talked a little longer, he would probably have brought off his coup.

"Now I show you somethin'. . . . Now I set about you. . . . I knock your jaw crooked. . . . An' if you don' die, your teeth never meet together no more. See, M'sieu White-liver? An' as you go down, I give you bang on de nose that mak' all de lil' bones stick through de skin. Nose all flat like cat. Gone, done, finish. See? Den if dey cleans you up an' puts you on your feet, I just give . . ."

Thud!

Otho's fist had shot out like a stone from a catapult, and with perfect timing and tremendous force had struck the Senegalese on the throat. A terrifically heavy blow, with fourteen stone of bone and muscle and sinew behind it—and M'Bongu was shaken.

With a wild whooping cry in his own vernacular, he clapped his left hand to his throat and drove his right at Otho's face. Otho parried with his left, and as M'Bongu's hand fell from his throat, Otho struck again, successfully, at the same place.

A loud boom from the gong closed the round, and Otho strolled to his chair unbreathed and untouched.

Splendid! He had lasted one round anyhow, and that round was his, thanks to the fact that hitting in the middle of a sentence is a game at which two can play.

"I'm going to demand to have your hands bandaged, Bob," said Joe Mummery as he violently fanned Otho with a towel. "'Tain't fair. You could bust both your hands on that nigger's head, and be out of the fight before he'd hit you. . . . Dislocate the bones."

"No need, Joe. I'm only going to hit him on the head once. . . . And that'll be the last wallop of the fight. . . . On the point of his jaw."

"That's the spirit, son," grinned Joe approvingly. "But for God's sake be careful. . . . Fight cautious and don't

mix it. . . . That negro'll never be knocked out in a lifetime, Bob."

"In his death-time then, p'raps," growled Sailor Harris, massaging Otho's legs.

§ 2

With the stroke of the gong, M'Bongu leapt, almost with one bound, to the middle of the ring, and sprang upon Otho like a tiger. With feet wide apart, planted like a rock, Otho stood firm and, swiftly ducking to his right, received the body of the charging negro upon the point of his left shoulder, a manœuvre that caused M'Bongu to give a coughing grunt as his solar-plexus made the violent contact. As he sprang back, Otho, rising, drove a terrific blow beneath the negro's breast-bone, glanced and feinted at the point of his jaw, and with a powerful right, struck again beneath the breast-bone.

The three almost simultaneous blows delivered on the same spot, the "mark," shook M'Bongu badly, and he drew back, hurt and bewildered, hotly followed by Otho, all on the aggressive. Feinting with left and right, Otho glanced at M'Bongu's mark, and as the latter's right dropped in defence, Otho struck the negro with all his strength upon the throat.

Splendid!

And what was this?

Had he been ill for long?

No; nonsense! There had been a battle and he had been shot. . . . Where? . . . In the head? . . . No . . . legs. . . . They wouldn't move. . . . What was the doctor saying?

"Quatre! . . . Cinq! . . . Six! . . ."

Consciousness and full understanding returned suddenly.

" . . . Sept! . . . Huit! . . ."

With a tremendous effort of will, Otho rolled over, pressed with all his strength upon the canvas-covered boards, drew up one knee beneath him, drew up the other and, swaying on all-fours, shook his head, and looked up.

M'Bongu was leaning against the post in a neutral corner, one hand holding his throat, the other pressed to the pit of his stomach.

" . . . Neuf! . . ."

Otho dragged one foot forward and planted it firmly.. He

must take his hands from the ground ere *"Dix"* was called, or he would be "out" . . .

Directly he took his hands from the ground, M'Bongu was free to hit him.

With a heave he got his other foot planted, lurched to his feet, and stood swaying.

M'Bongu ignored him completely.

In a tense and breathless silence, Otho tottered across the ring, balanced his body in front of M'Bongu, measured his distance, swung back his right—and dropped it to his side as the gong struck.

In grim silence, Joe and Sailor Harris worked over the relaxed body of their principal as he lay in his chair with outstretched legs, his arms resting along the ropes.

They dashed cold water upon him from head to foot, and fanned and massaged him violently, as though to get more than sixty seconds' worth from the too-brief minute.

"What happened, Joe?" said the revived Otho.

"He hit you, Son."

"I guessed it!" replied Otho.

"But you 'it 'im first, mate," said Sailor Harris, "or you wouldn't be talkin' now. . . .

"Blimey, if it ain't anybody's fight yet," he added with a grin. "You keep on pasting 'im in the slats like that, and you'll 'ave 'im—if 'e don't knock you out fust. . . . But you'll 'ave to keep out of 'arm's way."

"M'Bongu's arms?" said Otho's imp.

"How are you feeling now, Boy?" asked Joe, squeezing a large sponge over Otho's head and wiping his face as a mother does that of her child.

"Oh, lovely," smiled Otho.

And the smile was still on his face as he stepped lightly forth to meet M'Bongu for the third round.

§ 3

But there was no smile in Otho's heart. That had been a very near thing. He had taken the count for *nine,* and had M'Bongu been in a condition to give him one smack when he arose, it would have finished him. On the other hand, though, M'Bongu had not been in a condition to do anything

at all, and, but for the gong, it would have been Otho who would have done the hitting.

But he must not build too much on this, for M'Bongu had not been down at all—merely distressed and bothered. Still, one might take heart from that, and hope to distress and bother him again, even to the point of administering the *coup de grâce* . . . and perhaps this M'Bongu, while a marvel at fighting a winning fight, might not be so good in a losing one? There might be more lion-like *élan* than bull-dog tenacity in his make up . . . possibly "more teeth and claws than guts," as Joe would say.

Yes, there was a hope that though an English gentleman's strength and insensibility might be inferior to those of a negro, his spirit might be superior. . . . Mind triumphant over matter. . . . Anyhow, he would need the last ounce of his strength, science, experience and brain as well.

Yes, brain. Strategy and tactics! Surely brain, strategy and tactics combined with unquenchable spirit could equalise the physical disparity between Otho Bellême and this giant from the jungle.

M'Bongu was going more warily this round. With the back of his right glove against his throat, and the front of his left against his mark, he slowly circled round Otho, his small head held back, his half-closed eyes seeming to peer over the tops of his high cheek-bones.

Otho gratefully allowed him to circle undisturbed, for he still felt the effects of the blow that had almost knocked him out. His head sang, his arms were heavy, and his knees felt weak and inclined to bend unduly. Every second's respite was precious; so he warily watched and waited, making no movement save a slow pivoting as M'Bongu wove his circles about him.

Suddenly M'Bongu's great left arm shot out. Otho ducked, swung a vicious left hook at M'Bongu's mark and, as M'Bongu's right dropped to guard, Otho swung his own right, from his hip to M'Bongu's throat.

M'Bongu, with an extraordinary sound between a hiccough and a shout, threw science to the winds, sprang at Otho as though to seize his head in his hands to tear it from his body, received a terrific straight left on the throat and stumbled as Otho side-stepped. Instantly, Otho swung a smashing right on the point of M'Bongu's jaw, and, as Otho leapt

back, M'Bongu, with dropped hands, swayed forward and, stiff and straight as a falling tree, crashed face downwards to the boards.

One terrific yell from a thousand Legion throats rang out, as Otho retired to a corner, leant against the post and breathed deeply.

Was he going to keep his word to Joe and strike M'Bongu on the head but once? He hoped so, for, as he felt his knuckles, he realised that he could only strike that lump of rock, with all his strength, at the gravest risk of so shattering his hand as to put it completely out of action. If he hit M'Bongu's head again, it would be a final blow for one of them.

After the first wild cheering, silence fell as the referee's count reached *sept*.

Into the dead silence the sonorous voice shouted *"huit . . . neuf . . ."* and, with a childish chuckling giggle, M'Bongu bounded to his feet, apparently none the worse for the blow, and all the better for the nine seconds' rest.

Taken by surprise, Otho leapt at the rising M'Bongu, parried a tremendous blow that seemed to come almost from the ground, and found himself in M'Bongu's arms. Instantly he dropped his hands and rained punishing short-arm blows on M'Bongu's mark. M'Bongu clinched, pinning Otho's arms to his sides.

All right—a rest would be quite acceptable, and Otho reclined affectionately upon the broad bosom of M'Bongu. But while his body rested, his mind worked. The moment would come, and swiftly, when M'Bongu would weary of supporting him, and then things would happen. Nothing had been said by the referee about hitting in clinches, and M'Bongu would not be likely to make a nice gentlemanly break-away when he did obey the referee's sharp order.

Suddenly, M'Bongu, for the first time in two rounds, spoke, but in different strain from that of his former observations.

"We break clean, *hein?*" he said. "No hit in break-away, *hein?*"

"Right," said Otho. "Break away," and prepared for precisely what happened—a vicious upper-cut that would have ended the fight.

Righteous indignation lent extra force to the straight left

that Otho drove at M'Bongu's throat, and the right hook with which he found his mark.

Either Otho had modestly underestimated the strength of his truly terrible blows, or he had overestimated the protective value of M'Bongu's abdominal muscles, for the negro suddenly doubled up, his hands pressed to the pit of his stomach, his black bullet-head presented straight at Otho.

Upper-cutting with all his strength, Otho drove M'Bongu's head up, with a swift left hook knocked him sideways, and drove a beautifully timed right, straight from the shoulder, at the point of the negro's jaw, his whole weight and every ounce of his strength in the perfect blow.

As his fist struck home, Otho realised that this was almost certainly the heaviest blow that he had ever delivered, and it was without surprise that he saw M'Bongu's great form reel swiftly back, meet the ropes at knees and neck, collapse straight through them, and fall heavily to the ground.

He had knocked M'Bongu out of the ring.

And while the deafening cheers of the Legion rent the air, M'Bongu's seconds returned him whence he came.

On to the edge of the ring they lifted him, and willing hands thrust him beneath the ropes and into the appointed sphere of his activities, where he lay inert, apparently lifeless.

Not again was Otho to be caught napping. Like a statue, in the very act of striking, he stood motionless, as close to the equally motionless M'Bongu as the strictest fairness might permit—ready to deliver that great and final blow that should end the fight in the instant that M'Bongu's feet should be on the boards and his hands raised from them.

Un . . . deux . . . trois . . . quatre . . . cinq . . . six . . . sept . . . huit . . . neuf . . . TIME!

"Time" had saved M'Bongu—for one minute. In sixty seconds he must arise and face Otho or accept defeat.

§ 4

He arose and faced Otho. He did more, for, as the gong rang for the fourth round, he sprang lightly to his feet, and with a high-pitched laugh, ran to meet him.

This must be the real original indestructible Indiarubber Man! A minute ago he had been knocked senseless, out of

the ring, and here he was, laughing and dancing on his toes, as fresh and bright as though he had just left his bed. What can you do with a man who can't be knocked out and can't be worn down?

You can puzzle and bother and possibly frighten him, if you pit your brains and strategy against his brute strength: and, once again, Otho led a sudden and swift straight-left at the negro's throat.

As the tremendous blow went home, Otho saw M'Bongu's eyes change. Was the glare of rage succeeded by a momentary flash of fear? Almost in the same second, Otho feinted with his right at the same spot, and, as the negro's guard went up, landed heavily on his mark. M'Bongu doubled up, flung his left arm across his face, shot his right forward, and knocked Otho down. As he had had a fraction of time in which to "glide" the blow, causing it partly to glance along his cheek, Otho was not knocked out.

Springing to his feet, he again received M'Bongu's charge on the point of his shoulder, and, as the latter recoiled, Otho delivered a smashing upper-cut which, in turn, sent M'Bongu to the boards.

Rising slowly to the support of his knees and one hand, M'Bongu poured forth a torrent of appalling oaths and filthy invective, while the referee counted.

"Now I done playing with you! . . . My seconds tell me I let this fight go four rounds . . . just to make show for General. . . . Now I kill you. . . . I give you rabbit-punch and kidney-punch and when you fall down, I kick you in the stomach accidental. . . . Yaas, you Legion white trash, you come up for fifth round and you never come up for no more. . . . You done finish, because I . . ."

M'Bongu leapt lightly to his feet, and Otho, ducking and springing simultaneously, drove a heavy right at M'Bongu's mark and, his foot slipping, fell and brought the negro down on top of him.

As the gong rang, M'Bongu, rising with his broad back to the referee, struck Otho a terrible chopping blow with the bony side of his wrist, on the back of the neck.

"The damned dirty dog!" swore Sailor Harris, massaging Otho's numbed neck. "That bat-eyed blighter what's referee-

ing ought to be sittin' at a street corner 'olding out a tin mug. I'd give 'im a penny myself, I would, fer there's no doubt about 'im being blind."

"Swine nearly broke my neck," growled Otho. "Will it swell and stiffen, Joe?"

"No, Bob," replied Joe Mummery, as he massaged Otho's arms. "That rabbit-punch either puts you clean out, or nothing. . . . He hasn't broke your neck, but, by God, I'd break his, if I had my knee under his chin. . . .

"Who wasn't going to hit the nigger on the head only once?" he continued. "You'll smash your hands up, Bob, and then where will you be?"

"Yes," agreed Otho. "But each one was to have been a knock-out. . . . I haven't hit him on the head for wanton amusement at all."

"It's no good, son," replied Joe. "You'd want a fourteen-pound dumb-bell in your hand to knock that nigger out."

"An' then you'd only break the bloomin' dumb-bell," added Sailor Harris.

As the latter moved from in front of him, Otho glanced across at M'Bongu, and saw what he had been hoping to see after each round.

M'Bongu was obviously complaining of injury to his throat.

§ 5

In the next round, Otho devoted such aggression as M'Bongu's bustling tactics permitted him, to increasing the latter's perturbation concerning his throat. He was obviously anxious about it, "nursed" it, and permitted the problem of its protection to occupy his mind unduly.

Should all go well, and Otho live to fight a few more rounds, the good M'Bongu was going to be endowed with an obsession, an *idée fixe*. He was going to become all throat and his one thought was going to be its protection. And *then*. . . .

In this round, neither Otho nor M'Bongu was knocked down, and no spectacular nor memorable blows were struck. But, to the least experienced, it was obvious that the negro was out-boxed, out-paced and out-manœuvred. For half the time he seemed to have both hands at his throat while his

opponent delivered telling blows upon his mark; and when this vulnerable spot was protected, blow after blow found his throat.

The round ended with prolonged cheering from the now hopeful and thoroughly excited men of the Legion, while to his knot of seconds M'Bongu made no secret of the fact that his throat was swelling and threatening to choke and suffocate him.

As his throat was massaged, he swallowed painfully, between almost tearful complaints of the abominable unfairness of his perfidious opponent.

Apparently the advice of his seconds was that he should swiftly put an end both to the annoyance and to his enemy, for, in the next round, he rushed upon Otho as the gong struck, and, at a pace that could not possibly last, rained upon him ceaseless lightning blows with both hands. Otho was driven reeling backwards and, by foot-work of marvellous speed, by dodging and ducking, side-stepping, stopping, guarding, and covering-up, weathered the first and the worst of the cyclonic hurricane attack.

Suddenly, from a crouch, Otho's right shot up and, straight from his hip, as his body pivoted and rose, struck M'Bongu well beneath the chin, almost lifting him, and driving him backward.

Springing after him, Otho, with all his strength, hooked left and right upon the negro's prognathous jaw. With a gasping cry, M'Bongu collapsed and rolled upon the boards, clutching his throat with both hands.

There was no question of his being "out," for, scrambling to his knees, he crouched, doubled up, bending his body to and fro, moaning, gasping and coughing.

At the count of *"neuf,"* he rose, dodged Otho's swift drive, upper-cut with the violence of a kicking horse and knocked Otho flying with such force and suddenness that his head and shoulders struck the boards first.

It was with the snarl of a tiger that M'Bongu heard the gong.

As Otho revived to the shock of cold water, and the pain of Sailor Harris biting his ear, Joe delivered his ultimatum.

"If we have to carry you to this chair again, Bob, we're going to carry you out of the ring altogether."

Otho gave Joe Mummery a look that made him drop his eyes.

"I will, though," he growled.

Otho treated the remark with the contempt that he felt it deserved.

§ 6

In the seventh round the spectators were privileged to behold some perfect boxing, an exposition of the science and art of the Great Game at its highest. For M'Bongu was wary and chary, while Otho, beginning to feel the tremendous strain, was husbanding his strength for opportunity.

M'Bongu had at length developed tactics to counter those of his opponent, and whenever Otho feinted for his throat or mark, M'Bongu instantly lashed out a straight left and swift right, instead of, as hitherto, waiting to see what was behind Otho's feint, and whether it was his throat or his mark that was threatened.

Twice his new tactics succeeded, and twice Otho was sent to the boards. But the blows were of no more force than was sufficient to knock him down, and he was up again ere the referee began to count.

Just before the gong went, Otho, cornered by M'Bongu, glanced to his left, ducked to his right and rising beneath M'Bongu's out-shot left, upper-cut him heavily beneath the chin.

The eighth round was eventful only for the fact that, in a clinch, M'Bongu, almost lifting Otho, so manœuvred that his own body was between Otho and the referee, and then struck him left and right hooks in the small of the back with astonishing force and painful effect. Otho, angered, and casting prudence to the winds, swung a right-hook upon M'Bongu's ear, which brought the negro's head within reach of a smashing left-hook upon the grinning mouth. M'Bongu reeled from the blow, and Otho, with a lightning follow-up, brought over a terrific drive upon the negro's throat, sprang away as M'Bongu endeavoured to clinch, and walked to his seat, at the sound of the gong, amid the deafening cheers of his comrades.

"Well," he said, as Sailor Harris massaged one leg and William Bossom the other, while Joe Mummery kneaded his

biceps muscles, "I've lived eight rounds with the Negro Champion! . . . I die happy."

"Better live happy, Boy," smiled Joe. "Don't you go mixing it. You just box pretty, and take care of yourself. You can't knock him out and if you'd only go careful, you might last the twenty rounds and win on points yet."

"Garn away, Joe," said Sailor Harris, looking up. "That black nigger has only bin saved by the gong, twice."

"Ar, that's right," agreed William Bossom.

"You shut your head, and get on with your work," snapped Joe.

As the seconds dropped from the ring, Joe Mummery turned upon William Bossom with apparent ferocity.

"Didn't I always *say* he was World Champion stuff?" he asked. "Wasn't he a marvel right from the time he was a nipper? . . . Didn't he beat me *easy* for Champion of England—and me in me prime? . . . And can't he beat this bloody great black brute, I tell you? . . ."

Without reply, William Bossom patted his old comrade soothingly upon the back.

§ 7

Things went badly in the ninth round; for Otho's rashness, stubbornness, headstrong temper—and indeed his great heart and dauntless courage—led him into error, and the folly of playing M'Bongu's game. Blinded by the red mist of anger, he wandered from the path of wisdom and descended to M'Bongu's lower level of strategy.

The round began quietly, M'Bongu feigning weariness, while Otho menacingly watched his throat and nursed his own painful hands. Suddenly M'Bongu led a lightning left which banged Otho full upon the nose, jerking his head back and filling his eyes with tears, and instantaneously followed it with a right which split Otho's lip. Had he not been extraordinarily clever at "riding" blows which he could not parry, he would have been knocked out.

As it was, he was infuriated to madness.

A blow on the nose was what he loathed more than anything, not only by reason of the fact that it was extraordinarily painful and apt to cause much loss of blood, but because, to

his curiously fastidious mind, it was humiliating, undignified and disgusting.

To the fire of his wrath M'Bongu added fuel.

"Why don't you fight, you white dog?" he said. "You no fighter, no boxer—you acrobat. . . . You more like dancing *darweish* medicine-man. . . . Now you stand up to me and fight, you juggler."

And the foolish Otho, maddened by the pain of his punched nose, "stood up and fought."

Toe to toe, unflinching, without side-step, duck or dodge, he gave and took. With but little guarding and no feint or finesse, he stood upright and frankly "slugged" with M'Bongu as though he had never boxed in his life—save that every blow had every ounce of weight and strength behind it and came straight and true as bullet from barrel.

In a vast silence there was no sound but *thud* upon *thud* upon *thud* as fist smote flesh with terrible force. For seconds that seemed like minutes, M'Bongu struck Otho and Otho struck M'Bongu, left, right; right, left,—almost with the regularity of two blacksmiths alternately striking an anvil. Nor was Otho now aiming his blows at M'Bongu's throat. With white set face, clenched teeth and burning eyes, he gave and took, he took and gave, while Joe Mummery's heart seemed to die within him, and the great General himself murmured:

"C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre!"

And in those terrible seconds, Otho's eyes began to close, his mouth became shapeless, one of his ears dripped blood, and angry red patches appeared upon his white body.

But, for every blow he had received, a blow he had given, and each one terrible in its power and weight and the scientific skill of its delivery.

And suddenly Otho sprang back—not in evasion, but that he might literally fling his body in one last mighty revolt and rebellion against the immovable impenetrable Thing that was killing him, as, with bursting heart, he battled to defeat it.

He launched himself and struck, and, as M'Bongu swayed, collapsed and fell, Otho fell with him, and upon him.

The gong rang.

The seconds leapt into the ring and carried the boxers to their respective corners.

"Carry him out o' the ring," said Joe, as they reached Otho's corner, into which Sailor Harris lifted the chair.

William Bossom, who held Otho's feet, eyed the speaker apprehensively.

"Cor! He won't arf curse us, Joe," he said. "He'd knock us abaht if we . . ."

"'Ere wot's the game?" interrupted Sailor Harris, thrusting the chair beneath Otho. "You can't do that, Joe. . . . Not till the minute's up and he ain't come round when the gong goes.

"I'll punch *you* on the nose, Bill Bossom," he added.

"Carry him . . ." began Joe ferociously.

"If you three chattering magpies would get on with your job, it'd be a sound scheme," observed Otho, opening the still serviceable eye. . . . "I'm all right. . . . I'm . . . er . . . resting."

With a heavy sigh, Joe set to work like one possessed and, for the fifty-nine remaining seconds, dashed cold water upon Otho with one hand and fanned him with the other, while his colleagues massaged each an arm.

"Legs all right?" grunted Joe.

"Fine," said Otho, "but both eyes are closing."

"Let me chuck the sponge up, Bob," begged Joe.

"I'll chuck you up if you do," was the reply.

"You can't fight him if you can't see him, you young fool."

"I've no doubt I shall feel him, all right," grinned Otho, with swollen lips.

Joe sighed heavily.

"Look here, Bob . . . and if it was my last words, I mean it. . . . God strike me dumb if I don't. . . . You mix it in a slugging-match with that nigger again, or if it's plain you can't see 'im, up goes the sponge—an' me an' these two has you out o' the ring. . . . Even if you kick and bite us."

"Chatterbox!" replied Otho, and rose to his feet as the gong went for the tenth round.

§ 8

M'Bongu advanced smiling.

"Dat a good lil' scrap," he said. "First bit o' fighting you done to-night. . . . You fight some more, *hein?* . . . Or you

frightened? . . . Come on, white trash, stan' up and . . ."

Thud! Thud!

Otho had brought off a "one-two" with the lightning swiftness that that movement requires—a right followed almost instantaneously by a left lead.

Ducking beneath M'Bongu's out-shot left, he landed a tremendous left hook on his mark, and rising, drove a right at the point of M'Bongu's chin, seen for a fraction of a second *en profile.*

M'Bongu's arms dropped, his eyes rolled, and Otho with a straight left of perfect timing, sent him spinning across the ring to fall an inert mass in the corner.

Otho leant against a post and all but prayed that M'Bongu was "out," for he realised that the red-hot pain that shot up his left arm meant that if it were not broken, either the wrist-bones, or those of the hand, were dislocated.

Anyhow, the hand was out of action, almost too painful to touch, and utterly useless for offence. . . .

One hand and one eye—an eye that was closing fast!

M'Bongu stirred, rolled on to his back, and his right leg twitched violently, straightened and moved spasmodically to and fro, the foot describing a semi-circle upon the resin-strewn canvas.

God! He was going to recover—recover from a blow that would have put a white man to sleep for half an hour.

At the seventh count, M'Bongu drew up both his knees, at the eighth rolled over, and, like the Dying Gladiator, leant upon his hand.

But he was not dying. Far from it.

As his wandering eyes fell upon Otho, he spat; and Otho walked across to deal faithfully with him when he should arise.

M'Bongu rose to his knees and, for half-a-second after the count of nine, remained poised on one foot, one knee, and his left hand.

Suddenly he sprang, upper-cutting with his right and striking Otho a most foul blow, far below the belt, and, amidst howls of execration, he dodged Otho's right-handed drive at his grinning face.

Otho staggered back in horrid agony, and, his useless left pressed to his body in an effort to dull the torturing pain,

he doubled up and blindly lashed out with his right. . . . Thank Heaven it had got home. . . . Dragging himself more erect, he saw M'Bongu staggering back. . . .

Amidst a pandemonium of shouts and cries of *"Assassin!"* from the Europeans, M'Bongu retreated on the defensive, breathing heavily.

Crab-wise, crouching, Otho followed him, one-eyed, one-handed, sick, suffering, and almost spent.

He must make an end.

He must go down fighting while he could still see, and not, helpless and blind, be butchered to make a negro holiday —the sport of this creature who had no sense of sport.

Dragging himself erect, Otho rushed, and, feinting with his otherwise useless left, drove a smashing blow at M'Bongu's throat.

M'Bongu threw up his right knee, catching Otho in the pit of the stomach.

A furious burning indignation nerved Otho—indignation against the referee,—fool, swine, drunkard, ignoramus or whatever he might be.

He heard Joe's roar of *"Foul!"* and, falling heard no more.

Deaf. . . . Blind. . . . Sick. . . . *Out*. . . .

No.

He could hear. . . . He could see. . . . The cry was *HUIT*. . . . And mistily he could see M'Bongu's feet.

"Up, Bellême! . . . Up!" . . . "I Saye and I Doe." . . .

And Otho Bellême was up.

M'Bongu rushed and Otho struck. M'Bongu staggered. Otho saw a black blur and, gathering himself together, with the absolute uttermost last ounce of his strength, he launched himself upon it, delivering as he did so, the blow of his lifetime.

And then his knees sagged. . . . His brain reeled. . . . Loud waters surged about his ears. . . . He could not see. . . . He swayed, awaiting the *coup de grâce*. . . . He collapsed.

The waters subsided.

Neuf. . . . *Dix*. . . .

He climbed to his feet as though weighed down with mighty cables of iron.

"OUT!"

No! No! It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. He had been

on his feet before the word. He was *not* "out". . . . But he was blind.

His broken left hand he extended in defence, and with his right, he pushed up the flesh above one eye.

Where was M'Bongu?

Lying defeated, senseless, at his feet!

OUT.

EPILOGUE

Gibraltar.

MY DEAR 'THO,—

So *that* is where you are! How I have wondered what had become of you. I have just read an account in the paper here of your great fight. Does it make you Heavy-Weight Champion of Europe?

I am so proud of you, 'Tho. And I can't tell you how thankful I am that you enlisted under your own name, for I should never had known where you were, or what had become of you—for you would never have written to me.

You've been a bit silly, 'Tho dear; and as for me, I've been a perfect fool.

When I got no answer to a letter I wrote to you, just after I last saw you, I said, "And that's that"—and tried to put you out of my mind altogether. Later, it dawned on me that of course you never got the letter, and that that girl must have stopped it. And then I knew absolutely for certain what I ought to have known the whole time—that she had stolen my husband's note-case and money, and that you were quixotically shielding her from the consequences.

I do so hope this letter reaches you, 'Tho. We are staying here with the Morton-Hopes. He is a gunner who was at Eton with Jack and Jules.

We are crossing to Tangier next week for a holiday in Morocco, ending up with a visit to a real live Kaid whom Jules knows well. I can't tell you how thrilled I am.

I say, 'Tho, we shall both be in North Africa. Wouldn't it be lovely if we could all meet?

Anyhow, do write to me, c/o The Secretary, Cosmopolitan Club, Tangier.

With lots of love, 'Tho dear,

MARGARET.

Oh, Otho, you are the dearest friend I ever had.

§ 2

Mellerat,
N. Africa.

My dear Margaret,—

Is there another woman in the world who could have written such a letter as the one that reached me this morning? I think I feel happier to-day than ever I have felt before—in spite of everything. I have always turned to you mentally, Margaret, and only realised when I had utterly and finally lost you, that I had lost one half of myself. And I could hardly bear the thought that you believed me to be a despicable cur—mean, vicious and wholly unworthy of your friendship—that friendship which has been the one lovely thing in my life. Rather a lonely and miserable life since I left the Castle and you, Margaret.

Of course I never really supposed that you would believe me to be a miserable thief, but you must have been puzzled about the episode of poor little Victoria.

Thank God for your letter.

I could write you a long, long letter of thanks every day of my life, and still fail to give you the slightest idea of the depth of my gratitude. I feel another man, bigger, stronger, cleaner, a person of a higher value, now that you have told me that you are still my friend, as well as that I am, always have been, and always shall be, "the dearest friend that you have ever had."

Well, here we are, the four of us, safe and sound in the French Foreign Legion; Sailor Harris, who has been here before, quite at home, and expecting to be remembered by everybody; Joe Mummery, blowed if he can believe that he has really sunk so low as to be a soldier—not even a ruby Marine; William Bossom, his life-long comrade, content to be where Joe is; and I, wondering what I have done, and why I have done it.

But when Victoria died, and I read of your marriage, it was perfectly clear to me that I must get away as quickly as possible, and as far as possible—and that I must stay away.

I suddenly thought of lurid accounts that Sailor Harris had told me of life in the French Foreign Legion, and reached for my hat.

"Where are you goin', Bob boy?" asked Joe.

"To Algeria to join the French Foreign Legion," I said.

"What about a sausage and half a pint before we start, Bob?" replied Joe.

And nothing I could say or do would prevent him from joining me. We went round to see Sailor Harris (just discharged by Pug Pounder) for first-hand information and sound advice, and he observed that if we could wait till he'd ate up his bloater and finished his beer, he'd like to come too. And nothing we could say or do would prevent him from joining us!

But when Joe began instructing Mr. Bossom, his beloved friend, second, batman, and slave, as to the conduct of his affairs during his absence, Mr. B. replied that there weren't going to be any absence—between him and Joe.

"You have got a wife, fat-head," observed Joe.

"Yus—and useful now,—to mind the 'ouse and all," replied William.

Mrs. Bossom inquired as to the probable length of the "cruise," and, learning that her William proposed to leave her for at least five years, did approve, and bade him "make it ten" if so disposed.

"Wot's the good of marryin' a sailor, otherwise?" she observed cryptically.

And we set off, Margaret—three broken men and William Bossom. Sailor Harris broken in hope, finance and fortune; Joe Mummery broken by grief, disappointment and a sudden cruel blow; and I . . . oh, well. *You* know, dear.

And yet, somehow, there was a certain suppressed grim—what shall I say?—about us. Certainly not gaiety nor merriment, nor even cheerfulness, nor scarcely a humorous acceptance of things. I suppose it was really a sort of making the best of life and a sense of satisfaction that we had taken the knock but were game for another fight.

Anyhow, we were by no means patently miserable on our journey to Marseilles, nor even at Fort St. Jean, which provided us with the very dirtiest and nastiest accommodation that I have ever either experienced or seen.

There, Sailor Harris improved the shining hour by stating that he was full of invaluable information, and would have to be equally full of wine before it would be forthcoming. A case of displacement, I suppose, or perhaps of sound solid

sense which must be liquefied ere it would flow. Anyhow, Sailor Harris went into liquidation, and, ere all was done, spoke with strange tongues and undoubtedly said strange things.

It interested me greatly to see this man come to life and expand, as he found himself a person of importance and an object of interest. The poor soul was so hopeless and wretched a failure, with dead ambition and dying mentality, that Pug Pounder's throwing him out of the booth was the final stroke of misfortune.

That miserable place had been his last hope and refuge, with nothing beyond it but the gutter, the workhouse, or the gaol. Now he has taken a new lease of life, self-respect and ambition.

We were more than thankful to leave Fort St. Jean, even for the steerage deck of an ancient packet, of which Sailor Harris formed a low opinion.

We were each given one small blanket, a *gamelle* or large pot, and a tin cup, with which to face the world and the vicissitudes of life. The food, for excellent reasons, was not worse than that to which we had become more or less accustomed, and the iron deck was no harder nor colder than other iron decks.

And, at dawn of a most glorious morning, we sighted the port of Oran in Algeria, a truly lovely sight—with its marvellous background of the mighty Atlas Mountains, their peaks glowing from pink to red, in the light of the rising sun. Tier above tier, the white flat-roofed houses rising from the water's edge, climbed up the cliffs, and at that hour Oran was unforgettably lovely.

I thought of you, Margaret, and I wondered whether I should ever see the place again. How far more lovely Oran would look at sunset, and from the deck of a departing ship, a ship that was taking one back to England and to . . . But that is enough of that.

One was soon brought back to earth by the sight of crowds of dirty Arab beggars on the wharf, and the sound of sharp orders to "fall in."

We were quickly marched off, through the town to the Zouave Barracks, about a mile and a half from the Docks. Personally, I was quite exhilarated by the colourful Arab costumes, the uniforms, the gardens, bazaars, cafés, novel

street-scenes, and the sound of voices speaking in Spanish, French, and Arabic.

Wishing to speak truthfully and temperately I will merely remark that it was nearly as dirty and nasty a place as Fort St. Jean. Fortunately however, our sojourn here was brief, and, in the evening, in charge of a Sergeant and a couple of Corporals we entrained for Sidi-bel-Abbès. The Sergeant was a Russian, bred and born in London, a pleasant and kindly man with whom I had a long and most interesting talk about the Legion.

Looking back, those monotonous months at Sidi-bel-Abbès seem a very brief space of time. We were really extremely fortunate, for when a sudden order arrived for five hundred men to march immediately for a destination unknown, we four were included. Sailor Harris had quite expected to go with the first Active-Service draft, but Joe Mummery, Bossom, and I had hardly dared to hope. We were more than delighted, almost frantic with joy, and marched forth like boys let out of school, or convicts out of prison.

We started at about nine in the morning, headed by the band of the Legion playing *"Tiens! Voilà du boudin,"* and we did fifty kilometres that day.

I shall never forget that first march under Active-Service conditions!

It was most terribly monotonous. On we went, day after day, and, before long, this changed to night after night, the heat being terrible, and cases of collapse from heat-stroke numerous; and, although we marched throughout the entire night, we found it almost impossible to sleep during the day, owing to lack of shade, the great heat, and extreme fatigue. There is such a thing as being too tired to sleep, and we discovered it.

Macaroni, covered with grease, was served as food, and nightfall found us beginning our march as hungry as we were tired. In the light of dawn we were a pathetic sight, the men's haggard grey faces, with their expression of suffering and fatigue, showing the strain they were undergoing, carrying kit weighing nearly a hundred pounds, hour after hour, and day after day, on poor and insufficient food.

But no *légionnaire* "falls out sick" so long as it is humanly possible for him to keep upon his feet. It is not done—

partly for reasons of regimental pride and *esprit de corps,* and partly because falling out is the one thing worse than keeping on.

When, after about a month, we had at length reached the limits of human endurance, we also reached Mellerat, our objective, and went into camp.

Later.—I rather fancy it will be some time before you hear from me again, Margaret. We push off into the blue to-morrow, and, if there be any truth in the very persistent rumours, we are going on extremely Active Service, so possibly this may be the last letter of all.

If so, its contents will be quite worthy, for I have just heard something from the hearing of which I am still gasping —rather like our gold-fish that used to live in the pickle-jar.

I am writing this on my knee, and Sailor Harris is lying snoring on the ground beside me. A few minutes ago he said this something unbelievable.

I had stopped thinking about you—for once in a while, and was asking Sailor Harris about his former campaigning experiences in this part of the world. And, not for the first time, we pondered the meaning of a curious message which he took from the sister of a Moorish Kaid to a Spaniard in Tangier. A phrase, that puzzled us both, was one repeated six times in the message, *"Save the little jewels."* (*Jewels* he pronounced it, of course.)

We have often wondered what was to become of the *big* jewels! Suddenly, straight out of the Unconscious, I said to Harris:

"What was the name of the man to whom they took you, in Tangier?"

"Seenyor Peter-oh Mulleeny," he replied.

"Of course it was!" I whispered, *"Señor Pedro Maligni,* and he was to save *the little Jules!"*

"What's the matter, mate?" asked Harris, staring. "What 'ave I done now?"

"Nothing," I replied. "But I'll tell you what you did *then.* You saved the life of the boy who grew up to be the husband of my dear friend."

It's a queer world, Margaret . . . dear.

THE END

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